

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF LOW-INCOME ADULT STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES IN  
THE CLEMENTE COURSE IN THE HUMANITIES

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SERVICE ADMINISTRATION  
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

BY  
CHARITY ANDERSON

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 2017

DEDICATION

For Ian (1981 – 2011)

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks are owed to my advisor and dissertation chair, Charles M. Payne; committee members Miwa Yasui, of the School of Social Service Administration (SSA), and Danielle Allen, of Harvard; and reactors Jeanne Marsh and Bill Sites. I am grateful for your feedback and encouragement. Thank you to SSA, which provided financial support during my time as a doctoral student, and to the Fahs-Beck Fund for Research and Experimentation at The New York Community Trust, which provided generous support during my data collection and analysis. I would also like to thank Roberto G. Gonzales, of Harvard's Graduate School of Education, who encouraged me to consider SSA's doctoral program; I am grateful for your advice. Lastly, I am indebted to the Clemente Course in the Humanities and its directors, faculty, staff, and, of course, students. Thank you for supporting this project, welcoming me into your classrooms and homes, and sharing your experiences with me. Your generosity and kindness are unmatched, and this project would not have been possible without you.

## ABSTRACT

The Bard College Clemente Course in the Humanities (Clemente) has little in common with the market-driven ideology that undergirds most adult learning today. Instead, it is built on the belief that liberal education can offer adult students the possibility of personal change by fostering critical reflection. Across 31 courses in the US and Puerto Rico, Clemente provides economically and socially marginalized adults a free, yearlong, college-credit bearing course in the humanities. This project examines students' experiences in the course and seeks to answer two main questions: (1) How do students change or develop, if at all, through their participation in Clemente? (2) What is the relationship, if any, between students' course participation and their engagement as citizens and, where applicable, as parents?

Data for this two-year ethnography were gathered through: (1) approximately 400 hours of participant observation of two course sites in the midwest and northeast US; (2) interviews with students, graduates, and staff at those sites; (3) interviews with students, graduates, and staff at *other* US course sites; and (4) publically available secondary data such as course websites, alumni Facebook pages, and student newsletters. In total, 150 interviews (including follow-ups) were conducted with 76 students and 40 staff members.

Four primary themes emerged from students' experiences in the course: (1) an appreciation for the humanities; (2) personal growth and communal bonding; (3) a sense of self-as-democratic-citizen; and (4) more deeply engaged parenting. Students came to see value in the humanities and found a social and intellectual community where they felt valued and heard. Students reported that the humanities curriculum, coupled with instructors' Socratic, problem-posing instruction, helped them to think more critically, feel more confident, exercise more control of their lives, and engage in the economic and political aspects of their communities.

Student-parents reported feeling like role models and indicated that the course helped them to engage more meaningfully with their children. This study adds to our knowledge of how to better engage disenfranchised adults as democratic citizens and parents and demonstrates how rigorous educational opportunity – not remedial or compensatory programs – can spur personal growth and transformation.

## CHAPTER 1: Introduction

“Nothing, moving forward in my life, is going to be as simple as the naked eye anymore. Can I look at it that way and keep it simple? Yes, I can, but what good would that do me? If I don’t dive in and really flesh things out, the way I was taught and the way that I learned, then it’s always just gonna be another thing that passed in front of my eyes. ... The humanities allowed me to be not only a better person but to continuously see things differently.”

– Al<sup>1</sup>, 2015-2016 graduate, Latino, age 52

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Seventeen students sit under the green cast of fluorescent lighting in a cramped, stuffy conference room. It’s not meant to be a classroom, but it works. Ross, who’s teaching philosophy tonight, leans against the wall at the front of the room, twirling a marker with his right hand and holding his dog-eared, battle-scarred copy of *The Republic* in his left. Next to him is an easel with a pad of chart paper, rumpled and precariously perched. In front of students, copies of *The Republic* are splayed open and glowing in yellow highlighter. Notebooks, half-drunk cups of coffee, balled up candy wrappers, and phones dot the tables.

“All right. Plato, remember him? Allegory of the Cave?” Ross asks, waving his book above his head. “Let’s start with the cave itself. How do we interpret the cave?” The windows are open as far as they’ll go – just a couple inches – and the sounds of horns and sirens drown out the persistent hum of the overhead lights. Estelle takes a deep breath and exhales, “It’s *familiar*.” There’s a brief pause. Everyone seems to let that sink in. Then Mia adds, “It’s an obstacle for the uneducated, something to overcome.” “My cave happened before I was in prison,” Rick says. He was recently released from prison and is on parole. “Because of my lifestyle – druggin’ and hustlin’ – I wasn’t able to appreciate life. Being away for so long, I had the opportunity to really think about those shadows. Now I’m out and enjoying things like taking a shower. Walking down the street. Being around like-minded intellectual people.” Rick gestures to the room to indicate that *we’re* the like-minded intellectual people he’s talking about.

“And the prisoners in the cave – how about them?” Ross asks. “That’s *us*,” Evie says. Others chime in: “The people.” “Humankind.” “The innocent.” “OK,” Ross says. “Once you’ve been out and seen the light, do you go back?” “This makes me think of Harriet Tubman,” Tisha says. At 23, she’s one of the youngest in the class. “If you can read, you can be more than a slave. You’re not just a nigger.” She swivels her chair and looks around the room. “Sorry for anyone I offended,” she says. “But by going back to the cave, you’re saying that just because you’re a prisoner of an environment doesn’t mean you can’t have knowledge.” “I don’t think it’s possible to go back,” Shalisa interjects. “Once you learn something, you can’t unlearn it. I get what you’re saying, but you can’t go back into that cave.”

“*Professor!*” Lori says, exasperated and rubbing her eyes. “My brain hurts. I couldn’t

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<sup>1</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

stop thinking about this over the weekend. *Plato never shuts off!*” The room fills with laughter and agreement – “*Mm-hmm.*” “*I know that’s right!*” Through the din, I hear her sigh. It’s a deep, heavy sigh, and I see her chest expand and contract. “It’s so *complicated,*” she whispers to Luisa, who is seated beside her. “But I guess that’s higher education.” It’s both a question and a statement; this is the first college class either of them has ever taken. Lori is 47 and Luisa is nearly 70. “I know,” Luisa says softly as she puts her hand on Lori’s shoulder, “but this is just what we gotta do.”

(Excerpts from field notes)

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Neoliberal ideology underlies most discourse on adult education today; this discourse is largely technical-rational and focuses on creating a “flexible” and “adaptable” workforce – one that is capable of learning and *re-learning* skills for employment in an era characterized by the threat of the “flight of capital” across geographic boundaries (Mayo, 1999, p. 38). Adult education, once considered a public good, has been converted to a consumption good, such that Zwerling (1992) argues that when we speak about the “reeducation of adults, we are in fact speaking about retraining” (p. 102). Low-income adults in particular are increasingly targeted for vocational training and basic education courses, which are often dubiously marketed as pathways out of poverty and into jobs (Mattson, 2002). In a report on barriers to adult education, MacKeracher, Suart, and Potter (2006) found that adults who are racial or ethnic minorities, possess low literacy and foundation skills, have low incomes, and/or have physical, sensory, or learning disabilities are the least likely to pursue postsecondary education altogether.

The Clemente Course in the Humanities (Clemente) is designed to reach precisely those adults who seek postsecondary education but face significant barriers to enrollment and persistence. As a free, two-semester, college credit-bearing course in art and American history, literature, philosophy, and critical thinking and writing, Clemente has little in common with the market-driven ideology that undergirds most adult learning today. Instead, it espouses the idea that a liberal education, unlike remedial or compensatory programs, can offer disenfranchised

adults the possibility of personal change by helping them to reflect more critically (Zwerling, 1992).

Earl Shorris, the founder of the Clemente Course, was awarded a National Humanities medal in 2000, and the Clemente Course was a rare organizational recipient in 2014. Despite these prestigious honors (medalists are selected by the President of the United States) and despite the fact that there are numerous courses in operation, there is a dearth of research on the topic of free humanities courses for low-income adults. Researchers studying adult education have tended to neglect those students in continuing liberal education and, with the exception of a handful of unpublished dissertations and papers almost all of which are Canadian and Australian, have failed to substantively explore free humanities programs for low-income adult learners in the United States (Micari, 2001; 2003). While many individual Clemente courses evaluate themselves, and Bard College recently conducted a pilot nation-wide evaluation, there is no systematic data on the American courses and their impacts.

This dissertation, a two-year ethnography of Clemente courses, examines students' experiences in the program. Through participant observation of two Clemente course sites in the midwest (2014-2015) and the northeast (2015-2016) United States and interviews of students, graduates, drop-outs, course directors, instructors, and staff, I explore how low-income, historically marginalized adults change and develop through their participation in Clemente, as well as the underlying programmatic practices that prove most meaningful to participants.

### **Background on the Clemente Course in the Humanities**

Clemente was established in 1995 on Manhattan's Lower East Side by the novelist, journalist, and social critic Earl Shorris (1936-2012), who was inspired to start the course while writing his book, *New American Blues: A Journey Through Poverty to Democracy* (1997a). As

part of his research on the causes of poverty, Shorris visited the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility, a maximum-security women's prison about 50 miles north of New York City:

I asked a prisoner, Viniece Walker, why she thought people were poor. Niece ... said that it was because "they don't have the moral life of downtown," by which she meant Manhattan south of Harlem, where she grew up. Thinking she had probably undergone a religious conversion while in prison, which is not unusual, I asked rather casually what she meant by "the moral life." What a surprise when she said, "Plays, museums, concerts, lectures, you know." I said, "You mean the humanities." And she looked at me as if I were some kind of cretin: "Yes, Earl, the humanities." (O'Connell, 2000, n.p.)

Shorris initially believed the way out of poverty was politics, not the "moral life of downtown." To be "political," in Shorris' (1997b) mind, was not so much a matter of voting but rather engaging in "activity with other people at every level, from the family to the neighborhood to the broader community to the city-state" (p. 52). His experience at Bedford Hills, however, triggered an epiphany of sorts: If the poor were to enter the public world, and to practice the political life, it would require a "new kind of thinking – reflection" (O'Connell, 2000, n.p.). Niece had followed the same path that led to the invention of politics in ancient Greece: "She had learned to reflect" (Shorris, 1997b, p. 51). The humanities, the so-called "moral life of downtown," teach reflection. Vocational or remedial courses, Shorris (2000) argued, don't, and those are precisely the types of courses into which the poor are often funneled:

Whenever the nation becomes interested, for whatever reason, in alleviating the suffering of the poor, the method is always the same: training. Some programs also attempt to teach the poor to wear more appropriate clothing, others to give them the habit of rising early, and so on. In most such programs, including those suggested by the Welfare

Reform Act of 1996, both promise and punishment have a role. These policies result from the idea that the poor are different from the rest of the people, either less able or less deserving or both. (p. 9)

Shorris (2000) argues that to teach only discrete skills is akin to building a house without a foundation. A purely vocational education leaves learners vulnerable because they have not had the opportunity to develop the critical thinking and reflection skills that courses in the humanities foster. The result, posited Shorris (2000), was that “the uneducated poor have neither the economic nor the intellectual resources to take and hold their fair share of power in a democratic society” (p. 9).

Shorris’ experience at Bedford Hills alone didn’t lead to the founding of the Clemente Course. As a student at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, Shorris studied under the “New Plan” established by the University’s president, Robert Maynard Hutchins, whereby the school eliminated grades and course requirements and replaced them with general education classes and a series of comprehensive exams. Hutchins advocated focusing the bachelor’s degree on liberal education, and leaving specialization for graduate study. Hutchins also became known for his emphasis on the “Great Books,” through the evening courses he co-taught with his student and friend Mortimer Adler, and his support of the adult groups that subsequently proliferated throughout the country in the 1940s. The concept of a canon of “Great Books” and a general education based on interrogating them is the foundation of college programs and majors such as classical humanities, liberal studies, liberal arts, and humanities (Trowbridge, 2009).

Shorris’ idea for the Clemente Course is also mirrored in Hutchins’ forceful arguments for egalitarian and anti-capitalist pedagogy (Hutchins, 1956; 1968). Hutchins contended that no college could promise that *any* program would lead to a job, and many programs tied students up

in four-year programs to attain credentials for a labor market that may or may not exist upon graduation (Hutchins, 1943; 1962). Instead, he proposed a curriculum that would prepare students for a lifetime of reflection and critical thinking through text and dialogue, which is very much in the vein of Clemente (Hutchins, 1943; 1962). To this end, Clemente embraces three of Hutchins' key ideas. First, intellectual skills are necessary for active participation in a democracy; second, the humanities tradition lends itself to development of these skills; and third, all students in our society should have an opportunity to obtain these skills (Connell, 2006; Hutchins, 1936). Believing, then, that the "radical character" of the humanities could help the disadvantaged overcome the "surround of force" (including but not limited to isolation, oppression, and racism) that disenfranchised them, Shorris (1997a), with the help of the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center in lower Manhattan and writers, scholars, and professors who volunteered their time, established the first free, college-level, year-long course in the humanities exclusively for low-income adults, regardless of their prior education (p. 352).

For the first course in 1995, Shorris established very few criteria for enrollment. Prospective students (1) were between 18-35 years old (this upward age limit has since been removed), (2) lived in a household with an income at or below 150% of the Federal Poverty Level (for a single-person household in 2016, that is \$17,655; for two, \$23,895), (3) were able to read a tabloid newspaper in English, and (4) expressed an intent to complete the course (Shorris, 1997a). With the exception of the age cap, the requirements for students remain the same today; a high school diploma or GED is not required. Students in the inaugural class were provided bus and subway fare and, since the course was held at night, food; this too remains the same, though free child care has since been added at many sites.

A few days before the inaugural class was to begin, Leon Bottstein, president of Bard

College, offered to place the course under the college's "academic aegis" (Shorris, 1997a, p. 136) and, since 2000, Bard has conferred six transferable college credits to course graduates (Bard, 2015). Today, there are 31 courses in operation across the US and Puerto Rico, and to date, Bard has offered the class more than 100 times in 14 states and the District of Columbia (Bard, 2015; personal communication, May 11, 2017). More than 3,000 students have enrolled in the course, many of whom have earned college credit and continued to further their educations, and many of whom have not (Bard, 2015).

There are additional Clemente-inspired courses which provide free humanities college courses but award credits through different institutions – for example, the Odyssey Project in Madison, Wisconsin, which awards students credit through the University of Wisconsin-Madison; Venture courses, which award credit through three different Utah universities; the Bridge Program, which operates through Antioch University in Los Angeles; and the Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Kiowa Nations, which offer college credit to students of their Clemente-inspired courses through a few different Oklahoma universities. There are additional courses in Australia, Canada, and Puerto Rico. A note about terminology in this dissertation: both Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses go by a variety of names – Clemente, of course, but also Odyssey Project (Chicago and Madison), Free Minds (Austin and Dallas, Texas), Venture Course (Utah), Humanity in Perspective (Portland, Oregon), and Humanities 101 (Canada), among others. Only programs officially affiliated with Bard may use the "Clemente Course" name and confer credit from the college. However, to preserve the course sites' and research participants' anonymity, "Clemente" will be used to describe all courses in this dissertation.

### **Key Elements of a Course**

There are three key groups associated with any Clemente course – directors, faculty, and,

of course, students. Any person who wants to start a Clemente course is free to do so, but several elements must be in place: funding of approximately \$50,000/year; a host organization in the community, typically a social service agency, that is committed to developing the course; a course director to oversee the program and to teach a class; four additional faculty members; and, of course, students (Bard, 2015; Mass Humanities, 2016). Bard doesn't scout locations for courses or "recruit" course directors; directors are simply private individuals who have an interest in starting a course and *they* approach Bard when they're compelled to do so. The course director is a key figure in the success of a Clemente course, simultaneously playing the roles of teacher, administrator, mentor, and advocate. A course director attends and provides oversight of all classes; selects and coordinates faculty; recruits, interviews, and orients students; establishes the academic calendar, coordinates assignments, and orders materials; supports students academically and personally; serves as a liaison to the host organization, ensuring that the classroom is ready, and child care and transportation provisions are made; keeps records and makes reports to Bard; and, if funding allows, attends the annual meeting of course directors held at Bard College (Bard, 2015). Recruitment of students is largely the responsibility of course directors who network with social service agencies, libraries, child care centers, and schools to reach potential students. Word-of-mouth is also an important recruitment strategy among courses with a few years under their belts; potential students often learn of the course through their co-workers, parishioners, friends, and family members who took the course before them.

To a large degree, the success of a course hinges on its faculty. In many cases, faculty are friends, colleagues, or friends-of-friends of the course director. Most faculty at my two field sites, for example, had either known the course director, known someone at the host organization or funding agency, or were recommended by colleagues. Academic credentials are obviously

important to the position but personality and teaching style are just as crucial. As Bard (2015) states on its Clemente website:

Because Clemente Course instructors possess other important qualities besides academic credentials, the positions are generally not widely advertised in traditional ways. ...

Hiring Clemente Course faculty is often most efficient and effective when relying on personal referrals from people who understand the program's mission. Department chairs, faculty members, or humanities center staff at colleges and universities are often in a good position to recommend prospective instructors who would be first-rate, interested, and available. (n.p.)

Faculty members typically teach one class per academic year in their area of expertise. Course schedules vary by site, but each of the five classes – philosophy, literature, art history, American history, and critical thinking and writing – typically meets for 11 two-hour sessions during the academic year (Bard, 2015). There is no training program for Clemente instructors and no mandatory professional development. The assumption seems to be that Clemente faculty will enter the classroom with the skills and experience necessary to succeed and, if not, will likely not be asked back for subsequent years.

This dissertation examines two courses separated by both time and space. Although they are both Bard-affiliated courses, it's important to bear in mind that individual courses operate with considerable autonomy. Bard approves syllabi for courses that bear the Clemente name, but individual sites are responsible for their own recruitment, funding, budgets, and hiring.

Administrative tasks, of which there are many, and general quality control fall on the shoulders of course directors. Though Shorris' original requirement that students be 35 years old or younger has long since been removed, the requirements for entry are basically the same as in

1995. In practice, some courses more closely follow Shorris' original intent than others. Some employ a more, or less, intensive interview/screening process; some are more, or less, stringent about income restrictions; some are more, or less, strict in their teaching of the canon; and some admit students who already have college degrees, for example.

To illustrate this point about course autonomy, some courses, such as the Care Center in Holyoke, Massachusetts, and the Women's Veterans Initiative in Arizona, for example, only admit women. Some Clemente courses, like those in Illinois and New York, offer a second year "Bridge" course for graduates, while other locations – for a variety of reasons not the least of which is cost – do not. Some courses are able to provide full meals, classes for children while their parents are in class, and counseling and social service referrals while, again, others are not. Chicago offers the only course taught entirely in a language other than English, the Spanish language *El Proyecto Odisea*. The Cherokee, Chickasaw, and Kiowa courses, which teach Native humanities alongside western humanities, incorporate language into their classes. At a bare minimum, however, all Bard-affiliated Clemente courses provide books and course-related materials, transportation fare, and child care free of charge to students for the duration of the academic year (see Appendix A for sample course budgets). And one can expect to find seminar-style classes of about 20 students in session two nights per week from September through May.

### **This Project**

This project stems from several interests. I was initially interested in exploring low-income urban parenting as a dissertation topic; I was curious about the ways in which parents become engaged in their children's schooling and how that engagement might, or might not, affect them as parents. I sat in on a few Clemente classes in a large, midwestern city during the spring of 2015 to learn more about the course – what it looked like in practice, what material was

covered, who the students and instructors were – with the idea that I might explore the experiences of students who were parents. After observing a few nights, including a rich discussion of Malcolm X’s “The Ballot or the Bullet” in a US history class, I knew that I had found my dissertation topic in Clemente. It was unlike any classroom of adults I had seen before, or been a part of. The discussion was complex and layered, the texts were challenging, the teaching was nuanced and thoughtful, and the students were curious and engaged. As I took notes that night, I struggled to keep up; I didn’t want to miss anything anyone said. When I looked around the room, it seemed to me that nearly everyone was there because they *wanted* to be, not because they needed the class to graduate or the credit for a promotion. While there were parents, and grandparents, present among the students in that cohort, there were plenty who weren’t, or whose children were grown. The range of students and, by extension, life experiences that I saw during those initial visits to Clemente was striking. I determined that limiting my examination to only parents would leave many stories untold. Opening up my examination to all students would allow me to not only have a larger sample, but also to compare parents’ and nonparents’ experiences in the course.

This dissertation also stems from my personal experience. My own background is in the humanities – art and art history, to be exact – and education. As an urban high school teacher, I taught AP art history, among other subjects, to my students in Brownsville, Brooklyn. Bringing that course to those teenagers was, far and away, the most rewarding teaching experience of my career. The humanities opened their eyes in a way that other courses had not. I still hear from former students, many years later, who find me on Facebook or track down my email address to tell me how much the course meant to them. It illuminated a world they hadn’t known until then and, by succeeding in a rigorous, college-level class typically offered to “rich kids,” it showed

my students that they *were* capable, that the humanities *did* belong to them as much as anyone else. When I sat in on those Clemente courses in 2015, it reminded me of my experience as both a student and teacher of the humanities, and I wanted to learn more about what, exactly, was going on in the Clemente classroom and in students' minds. Were the classes I saw an anomaly? Were the students themselves an anomaly? What was going on there?

The primary aim of this dissertation is to examine the experience of students in the course. More specifically, this dissertation answers two main questions:

1. How do low-income, historically marginalized adults change or develop, if at all, through their participation in Clemente?
  - a. What is the relationship, if any, between participation in the course and their engagement as citizens?
  - b. What is the relationship, if any, between participation in the course and their parenting?
  - c. How does participation in Clemente affect other domains of their lives, if at all?
2. What are the underlying programmatic practices or features that are most meaningful to participants and how do those practices or features operate?

### **Significance**

Answers to these questions are important not only because humanities education for low-income adults is understudied and a notable gap in the adult education literature exists, but also because better understanding students' experiences may challenge long-held assumptions about who *is* and *is not* capable of benefitting from a rigorous, intellectual education. Negative assumptions about the intellectual capacity of low-income and/or racial minority students have led large segments of the student population to be excluded from demanding academic curricula

from the primary grades onward. Furthermore, humanities education is in a state of contraction, if not complete elimination. This can be seen as a crisis for education *and* democracy, as liberal education cultivates citizens' ability to think critically and independently and to empathize with others – outcomes particularly salient for disenfranchised adults and communities (Nussbaum, 2010; Shorris, 2000).

This study holds implications for both education and social work, as it *is* possible that there are ways outside of more traditional programs and outreach efforts to “engage” low-income adults as citizens and parents, and Clemente may serve as a potential model of engagement, support, and transformation for economically disadvantaged adults. This study seeks to shed light on what happens when adults from society's margins are afforded the opportunity to pursue an intellectually rigorous course of study with the supports necessary to succeed.

At its inception, social work was deeply committed to providing social and educational opportunities for marginalized, working class people. Hull House, for example, saw the value in the humanities for the poor, leading free courses in art, literature, and history and hosting concerts and lectures on contemporary subjects for working class community members, many of whom were newly arrived immigrants. The very objective of Hull House, as stated in its 1894 charter, echoes aspects of Clemente: “To provide a center for a higher *civic* and social life [and] to institute and maintain *educational* and philanthropic enterprises” [emphasis added] (Addams, 1912, p. 112). The humanities classes at Hull House were “composed of people who come regularly and study faithfully,” and rather than replace the classes with purely vocational or practical education, Addams (1900) argued:

We would by no means advocate the abandonment of these classes, but rather the enlargement and progressive development of them. Certainly, the people who are capable

of sustained mental effort should be fed and helped, as indeed they are by every “popular lecture,” every reading room and “Extension” class in the city. (p. 1)

Though social work remains committed to educational equity, the field has largely moved away from using liberal education as a tool for citizen development and engagement. This study, however, demonstrates that liberal education may act as an effective intervention in the lives of the disaffected poor.

### **Outline of the Dissertation**

This dissertation begins with Chapter 2, a literature review, followed by Chapter 3, which outlines the research methods used. The research component of this dissertation can be thought of in two parts: the first part, Chapters 4 and 5, examines what happens in the classroom itself. Chapter 4 looks at the ways in which the context and the course material impact participants. It seeks to explain who the students are and what brought them to the course; their thoughts on the curriculum and the ways in which the humanities content is uniquely impactful; the dominant cultural capital students appear to gain as a result of the course, which they see as valuable, not hegemonic; and the role students see for the humanities in their communities. Chapter 5 explores the way community is created in the classroom and what a sense of community means to students. Dialogic instruction is key to fostering student engagement and community in the Clemente classroom, and students describe their classmates and staff as “family” whom they “love” and to whom they feel closely “bonded.” The class fulfills many students’ need for social and intellectual community, and they deeply miss it when the course ends.

The second part, Chapters 6 and 7, explores what happens to the students and how the course affects them. Chapter 6 examines the relationship between course participation and students’ sense of themselves as democratic citizens. Most students report that the course

bolsters their critical thinking and confidence, helps them regain control of their lives, and motivates them to act in positive ways in their communities – all of which contribute to a healthy, deliberative democracy. Chapter 7 explores the relationship between course participation and students’ parenting. Both nationally and in this study’s sample, Clemente students are mostly women, many of whom are mothers. Mothers draw strength from the classroom community of women and value the child care provided by the course. The vast majority of parents, both mothers and fathers, felt that the course helped them to become better “role models” for their children and increased their engagement in their children’s lives and education. Finally, Chapter 8 offers concluding thoughts; a discussion of limitations, including sample self-selection and course attrition; suggestions; and implications for education and social work.

## CHAPTER 2: Literature Review

### Adult Education

In studying the growth of American adult education during the Progressive Era, historian Leon Fink (1997) noted a tension between social control – the desire to create obedient citizens – and social criticism and transformation. There is a major contradiction at the core of adult education in the US, a tension between education for the building of democracy and education for the production of capital. In one of the few books written on the history of American adult education, Harold Stubblefield (1988) notes that adult educators of the early twentieth century viewed their students as “citizens” and saw education as a way to stimulate new possibilities for democratic citizenship.

Eduard Lindeman, one of the early twentieth century thinkers on adult education, championed the idea of education for democratic participation, as well as the notion of lifelong learning, similar to that of his friend and colleague, educational philosopher John Dewey (Brookfield, 1984; Simpson, 1994). “The complete objective of adult education,” Lindeman wrote in 1937, “is to synchronize the democratic and the learning processes” (as cited in Brookfield, 1984b, p. 190). He argued that the primary task of adult education was to assist adults in making informed choices about critical social and political issues. Lindeman believed that adults’ personal, lived experiences should foster the desire for self-improvement but should also raise awareness of one’s role in enriching society and improving the lives of others – that is, acting as a democratic citizen (Fisher & Podeschi, 1989). Adult education was more than a pastime or vocational pursuit. Rachal (2015) argues that adult education was, in fact, an “essential ingredient in the preservation and renewal of an idealized, though flawed, system of government” (p. 2).

Perhaps the best statement of Lindeman's adult education philosophy is contained in *The Meaning of Adult Education* (1926), where he explains that adult education should be a lifelong activity, non-vocational, center teaching around "situations" not "subjects," and place primary emphasis on learners' experiences (p. 8). Of these four principles, three still predominate to some degree in adult education in the US (Brookfield, 1988). However, Lindeman's (1926) emphasis on the non-vocational character of adult education, the belief that "adult education more accurately defined begins where vocational education leaves off," stands today as the most seemingly radical of his characterizations (p. 5). Although much early adult education – study circles, town hall meetings, and learning groups – mirrored Lindeman's philosophy, cultural and political change ultimately hastened a shift in the goals and practices of adult education (Courtney, 1994; Fisher & Podeschi, 1989; Ramdeholl, Giordani, Heaney, & Yanow, 2010). The shift away from the progressive ideals of adult education has continued largely unimpeded to the present day, such that Stubblefield (1988) argues that "how to equip adults for their place in the economic sector now engages the greatest interest" of adult education (Introduction, n.p.).

This interest in education-for-job-preparation is seen clearly in the Spellings Report on the state of American higher education, released in 2006 by the US Department of Education, which focused entirely on education for national economic gain. The Report concerned itself with perceived deficiencies in STEM areas and other knowledge-intensive fields critical to global competitiveness, national security, and economic prosperity. Its focus was on highly specialized and applied learning that can generate profit (US Dept of Ed, 2006). Philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2009) argues that by omitting liberal education (i.e., the arts and humanities and with them, critical thinking and so-called soft skills) the Report signaled that "it would be perfectly all right if these abilities were allowed to wither away, in favor of more 'useful'

disciplines” (n.p.). As society increasingly organizes itself around the market-based values of neoliberalism, adult education has shifted its focus from dialectical discourse and critical thinking to vocational training (Giroux, 2010; Nussbaum, 2010). While providing economic stability to adult learners is not without considerable merit, this vocational emphasis limits the transformative possibilities of liberal education and likewise ignores education’s potential to foster growth and engagement, particularly among low-income, marginalized adults (Mattson, 2002).

In a 2008 *Issue Brief*, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) used data from the Adult Education survey (2001 and 2005) to examine the participation of adults aged 16-64 with low levels of education (i.e., those who did not complete high school or earn a GED) in formal (i.e., instructor-led) learning activities. Among *all* individuals aged 16 and older in 2005, 44% participated in some form of adult education in the 12 months prior to the survey. Work-related and personal interest courses were the two most common formal learning activities among all survey respondents, but were also the activities in which adults with low levels of education participated less frequently than more highly educated adults (NCES, 2008). Among those without a high school credential, participation rates in adult basic education, ESL, and GED classes were, not surprisingly, highest. The lower the education level adults had attained, the less frequently they participated in courses, and the fewer courses they took when they did participate (NCES, 2008). In short, data indicate that adults with limited prior education – and, we might infer, with low incomes – were least likely to pursue college courses or classes simply of personal interest, the domain under which Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses would fall.

The Humanities Indicators, a project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences

aimed at providing a “nonpartisan, objective picture of how the humanities are faring,” analyzed data from those same NCES Adult Education surveys from 2001 and 2005 (American Academy, 2016). Perhaps heartening for courses like Clemente, the surveys reveal a small but growing number of adults pursuing continuing education in the humanities – growing from 1% of the American population over the age of 16 in 2001 to 1.5% in 2005 (American Academy, 2016). As is the case with Clemente courses, the surveys reveal that those who had taken a humanities course for personal interest in the year preceding the survey were mostly female (about 53% in 2005), though they skewed younger than the typical Clemente student (American Academy, 2016). It should be noted that while this NCES data is the most recent available, it is now over a decade old, and it is unclear if the trend of adults pursuing humanities education for personal interest continued upward. Additionally, because adults with limited education, and by extension lower incomes, were least likely to pursue courses for personal interest, this data likely encompasses a more highly educated segment of society than Clemente’s typical student.

### **Transformative Learning**

Critical social theorists propose that “quality education is as much about teaching students the ability to read the world more critically (ideology critique) as it is imagining a better world that is less oppressive (utopian critique)” (Leonardo, 2004, p. 16). These theorists support the production and application of theory that underlies a transformative approach to learning and provides the framework for a form of critical discourse that can change the pedagogical process from one of knowledge transmission to knowledge transformation (Althusser, 1976; Leonardo, 2004). Their approach to quality education engages in a language of transcendence, so there is a capacity to imagine an alternative reality and a hope for education and society (Giroux, 1983; 1988; Greene, 1986; Kincheloe, 1993).

Within the education field, critical social theory is characteristically associated with Paulo Freire, who articulated a theory of transformative adult learning that he termed conscientização, or consciousness-raising. His ideas, which originated in his literacy work with poor Brazilian peasants, have significantly influenced the development of a critical perspective in adult education (Collins, 1991; Welton, 1995). Critical consciousness refers to a process by which learners develop the ability to analyze, question, and act in the cultural, economic, political, and social contexts that shape their lives. This process, known as praxis, consists of action and reflection in a transactional or dialectical relationship. To Freire, education, through praxis, should foster freedom among learners by enabling them to reflect on their world and ultimately change it.

Freire (1970) was particularly critical of “banking” education where “knowledge is considered a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 72). Though knowledge may be transmitted in this way, it is a non-reflective mode of learning; students receive “deposits” of information without full understanding or critical thought (Jarvis, 1987). In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970) outlined 10 hallmarks of the “banking” method:

- (a) the teacher teaches and the students are taught;
- (b) the teacher knows everything and the students know nothing;
- (c) the teacher thinks and the students are thought about;
- (d) the teacher talks and the students listen – meekly;
- (e) the teacher disciplines and the students are disciplined;
- (f) the teacher chooses and enforces his choice, the students comply;
- (g) the teacher acts and the students have the illusion of acting through the action of the

teacher;

(h) the teacher chooses the program content, and the students (who were not consulted) adapt to it;

(i) the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students;

(j) the teacher is the Subject of the learning process, while the pupils are mere objects. (p. 73)

Freire argues that this model of education is oppressive and, though ubiquitous, does not inspire critical consciousness among students. In contrast to this additive form of education stands the “problem-posing” method, a method predicated on communication – “dialogical relations” – which breaks down the dichotomous teacher-student relationship (Freire, 1970, p. 79). In this way, education becomes a dynamic practice of liberation where both students and teachers are jointly responsible for growth. It can be argued that non-traditional adult learners thrive in learning environments that promote their active engagement in the teaching and learning encounter. Freire argues that educators must listen to students and begin with issues and “generative themes” that matter to them. There is no one-size-fits-all pedagogy but, rather, educators must be attuned to contexts and histories that impact students.

Outside of the “banking” method of education, teachers are no longer seen as having all the answers, but are seen as teacher-students. Similarly, students are no longer seen as deficient, but are instead constructed as student-teachers. But teaching non-traditional students doesn’t simply entail asking questions or engaging in dialogue. As Palmer (2007) argues, “Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher” (p. 10). This is where the concept of authenticity comes in. Cranton and Carusetta

(2004) developed a continuum of “beginning authenticity to mature authenticity” as it relates to educators. Instructors with mature authenticity are reflective of their teaching practice and don’t harbor “fragmented authority-based perceptions of self” but have a “more integrated sense of self” (p. 281). They see students as individuals, allowing “for the development of genuine relationships with students in which the educator makes a difference in their lives and feels a difference in his or her life” (p. 291). Jarvis (1992) similarly suggests that individuals are authentic when they choose to act in ways that “foster the growth and development of each other’s being” – that is, teachers who make a conscious effort to help students develop (p. 113). In other words, adult educators and their students learn together through dialogue, as Freire (1972) suggested. The result of authentic teaching is that “teachers learn and grow together with their students” (Jarvis, 1992, p. 114).

Jack Mezirow (1981) developed a theory of adult learning grounded in cognitive and developmental psychology, “a critical theory of adult learning” (p. 3) called transformative learning (Dirkx, 1998). Based on his study of American women returning to college after an extended time away, Mezirow (1978) was the first in American adult education to use the critical theories of Jurgen Habermas and Paulo Freire to promote critical reflection as central to transforming one’s learning from experience (Collard & Law, 1991; Wilson & Kiely, 2003). Transformative learning theory’s primary instructional objective is individual perspective transformation, which Mezirow (1990) believed to have important social implications and potential. As learners develop a greater awareness of themselves and a deeper understanding of their own experiences, their aspiration to grow and develop increases. Perspectives – our beliefs, values, and assumptions – help us make sense of information in our internal and external environments but, conversely, can also distort or limit how we perceive things or what we

understand (Dirkx, 1998). Through critical reflection, however, adult learners come to identify, assess, and even reformulate the assumptions on which perspectives are based.

Both Mezirow and Freire see critical reflection as central to transformation. Freire, however, sees the end goal as societal transformation; the more critically aware adult learners become, the more able they are to transform society and their own reality (Taylor, 2008). Cunningham (1992) argues that “Mezirow stops short of this view. Personal transformation is in Mezirow’s view, in and by itself, sufficient. This is why he can link himself conceptually to Freire (conscientization is critical reflection), but draws back at the concept of praxis” (p. 185). It is important to note, too, that Mezirow (2000) attached conditions necessary for transformative learning, such as “elements of maturity, education, safety, health, economic security and emotional intelligence” (p. 15) and further indicated that “hungry, desperate, homeless, sick, destitute and intimidated people obviously cannot participate fully and freely in discourse” (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2010a; Mezirow, 2003, p. 60). Similarly, Merriam (2004) suggested, albeit vaguely, that a “rather high level of cognitive functioning” is likely required for the dialogue and introspection necessary to foster perspective transformation (p. 61; Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2010a). Groen and Hyland-Russell (2010a) argue that, according to these criteria, most low-income non-traditional students, such as those enrolled in Clemente, would be unjustly “excluded from the possibility” of transformative educational experiences (p. 227).

### **Current State of Knowledge**

Free humanities courses are understudied programs. A September 2016 search of Articles Plus, a database powered by EBSCOhost that searches over 40,000 interdisciplinary journals and periodicals, for “Clemente course” in the full text of English-language peer-reviewed academic journals garnered just 23 results dating from 2002 to 2015. While some of

the results were scholarly book reviews of Earl Shorris' various works, some were studies of Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses. By far, the most-cited programs are those in Australia and Canada. There is a dearth of research on American courses.

**Clemente Courses in Australia.** Australia Clemente has enrolled more than 500 students aged 18-70 and expanded across nine sites since its inception in 2003 (Australian Catholic University, 2013). Most of the research on Australian Clemente has sought to understand the individual journeys that participants undertake. Stevenson, Yashin-Shaw, and Howard (2007) found that homeless students (n=9) reported experiencing positive personal changes and some reported concurrent bodily changes (e.g., straightness of back, walking attitude, deportment, walking with purpose), indicating a relationship between course participation and students' minds and bodies. Howard, Butcher, and Egan (2010) synthesized unpublished papers and conference presentations (Egan et al., 2006; Gervasoni, Smith, & Howard, 2010), as well as a few works published in Australian education journals (Howard et al., 2008; Stevenson, Yashin-Shaw, & Howard, 2007). Taken together, the studies indicate that Clemente has had a "significant impact on these students' development of a new sense of identity, their independence and ability to establish control over their personal wellbeing, and their sense of hope regarding future" (Howard, Butcher, & Egan, 2010, pp. 99-100).

A 2012 report by O'Gorman, Howard, and Butcher details a mixed-methods research project carried out over three years (2009-2011) across three Clemente sites to examine how disadvantaged students improved their social inclusion. Data, which were drawn from 18 respondents who completed surveys at three time points (beginning, interim, and end of the course) and from semi-structured interviews with 12 students, indicate that Clemente students experienced multiple forms of disadvantage including homelessness, financial hardship, material

deprivation, and social isolation but also had relatively high levels of personal agency, perhaps speaking to participant self-selection. Survey data showed that students reported positive changes in four areas: personal learning, personal aspects of life, social connectedness, and quality of life, demonstrating that the effects of education can go beyond personal learning outcomes (O’Gorman, Howard, & Butcher, 2012).

Most recently, Gervasoni, Smith, and Howard (2013) examined the experience of humanities education for six regional and rural Australian women who suggest that the course was “life-giving” (p. 262). The students identified the critical importance of providing a supportive learning environment and also highlighted the cherished relationships they formed with one another during the course. In sum, the data seem to indicate that Australian Clemente courses have positive impacts on participants, though the samples in the aforementioned studies are particularly small and, as is the case in Clemente courses throughout the world, self-selected. Although it could be argued that, in these studies, it’s impossible to attribute positive participant outcomes to course participation alone, the important point is that participants themselves *say* the course affected them positively and, in some cases, had a transformative effect on their lives.

**Free Humanities Courses in Canada.** There are free humanities courses at eight sites across Canada (Lakehead University, 2015). Unlike most American courses, however, many Canadian courses are held on university campuses and, also unlike most courses in the US, most Canadian courses do not grant participants college credit. Groen & Hyland Russell (2009) reported on the findings elicited from semi-structured interviews with students (n=15) from Calgary’s course, called Storefront 101, and concluded that what was most valuable to participants was the opportunity to critically reflect: “What is most essential is not the end product, a particular set of facts, skills, or knowledges. Rather, the *process* is most important:

gaining insight into oneself, learning to open up to dialogue, becoming aware of oneself in relation to others in society” (p. 6). Groen and Hyland-Russell (2010b) also conducted a mixed methods study of three free humanities programs in Canada. Data were gathered from a demographic survey instrument for students (n=70), document analysis, and individual interviews with students (n=25), staff (n=21) and committee members (n=9). Data indicated that despite tremendous socioeconomic challenges, students came to the course eager to learn, and many spoke about the pivotal role of the instructor in alleviating their fears and creating a comfortable but dynamic learning space.

In additional studies, the authors drew on and, in some cases, supplemented data from the aforementioned study to examine more closely the experiences of instructors (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2010a), students (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011), the three programs’ planning processes (Groen & Hyland-Russell, 2012), and the ways in which the courses “transgress invisible boundaries” and cross cultural divides (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2013, p. 43). More recently, Hyland-Russell and Syrnyk (2014) examined the experiences of two cohorts of Humanities 101 students – fall (n=31 registrants) and winter (n=30 registrants). The results of their mixed methods analysis reveal that the courses had a largely positive impact on participants, though evidence of positive progression was stronger for the fall cohort of students, while the winter cohort showed little change or, in some cases, appeared to regress. The results suggest that while humanities courses may have a positive impact on participants, the type and degree of the impact may vary. Finally, Hyland-Russell and Syrnyk (2015) reported on the first phase of a larger multi-method longitudinal study aimed at investigating marginalized non-traditional adult students, their learner identity formation, and their ability to sustain learning engagement. Data indicated evidence of shifts in learners’ (n=13) beliefs about themselves and

their abilities, with a sense of hope for the future, but putting their new perspectives into practice was problematic for many students, as they continued to face obstacles once the course concluded. In total, the evidence from Canada points to a positive relationship between course participation and students' self-concepts. As is the case with the Australian studies, though, the sample sizes are relatively small in most cases and, in all cases, self-selected.

**Free Humanities Courses in the US.** Although there are more academic publications focused on Australian and Canadian free humanities courses, there is some data, albeit limited, on American courses. In the appendix of his first book, *New American Blues: A Journey Through Poverty to Democracy*, Clemente founder Earl Shorris (1997a) reported a preliminary evaluation completed in large part by the founder of the Roberto Clemente Family Guidance Center, Dr. Jaime E. Inclán. A little over half of the students completed the course, leaving a sample of 17 for the pre- and post-course surveys. The surveys assessed four domains (i.e., changes in self-view, cognitive changes, interpersonal changes, and changes in one's values framework) and results indicated significant changes in "some aspect of each of the four levels of assessment" (Inclán as cited in Shorris, 1997, p. 405). Students' self-esteem and problem definition and formulation increased significantly ( $p < .051$ ) from class orientation to the last course session, while their use of verbal aggression as a conflict resolution tool decreased significantly ( $p < .061$ ). Statistically significant increases were also noted in the values domain, specifically in benevolence ( $p < .051$ ), spirituality ( $p < .051$ ), and universalism ( $p < .101$ ). Despite the moderate statistical significance, the increase in students' self-esteem is noteworthy because it indicates the possibility of fostering psychological growth and self-valuation through educational intervention (Shorris, 1997a). It is necessary to state, though, that most of the changes reported were not statistically significant and, without comparative data from

individuals who did not participate or who were enrolled in an alternative program, these results should be viewed as “provisional” at best (Katzev, Allen, & Peters, 2009, p. 1975).

Additional, though not particularly stronger, evidence is available from a humanities class offered through Stanford University’s School of Continuing Studies and Program in Ethics in Society to groups of 15 to 20 women residing in a drug and alcohol treatment program called Hope House (Satz & Reich, 2004). Established in 2001, the Clemente-inspired course focuses on classic texts, with an emphasis on political and social issues, and awards participants two units of transferrable college credit upon completion. Anecdotal evidence indicates “the great potential the humanities have to bridge divides of class and race. These women experienced joy and self-confidence by participating in a democratic community of inquiry” (Satz & Reich, 2004, p. 74). Initial follow-up on participants revealed that approximately 70% of the women remained drug-free and out of jail or prison, a value the authors describe as “far better than the national average,” though they provide no measure, sample size, or time frame, and the sample appears to have been self-selected (Satz & Reich, 2004, p. 74).

Katzev et al. (2009) examined the effects of a similar college-level free humanities course sponsored by the Oregon Humanities Council and Reed College, called Humanity in Perspective (HIP), for disadvantaged adults (n=15) in Portland, Oregon, and for inmates (n=15) at Eastern Oregon Correctional Institution (EOCI), a medium-security correctional facility for men in Pendleton, Oregon. Pre- and post- surveys of the students indicated that the course exerted “considerable influence” on the students (p. 1982). Within-group comparisons indicated that HIP students displayed significant improvement in participation in volunteer organizations, enrollment in college classes, life satisfaction, verbal ability, and analysis of the major course themes. EOCI students (inmates) improved on their desire to participate in community

organizations and vote in elections, as well as in their critical thinking, life satisfaction, and application of major course themes (Katzev et al., 2009). While these results appear to demonstrate that the humanities can foster a range of positive changes in individuals from low-income communities and prison settings, the conclusions should be “tempered” by the limitations of self-reported data (especially for the inmates, who could only describe what they *planned* to do once released), the small sample sizes, and the variation between the students and course settings (Katzev et al., 2009, p. 1983).

Finally, there are two unpublished evaluations that were not returned in the literature search but are nevertheless important to mention. Mass Humanities, the Massachusetts-based affiliate of the National Endowment for the Humanities, commissioned a longitudinal (2006-2011) evaluation of its courses in Dorchester, Holyoke, and New Bedford (Rosi, 2011). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected from several sources. Written surveys were collected from graduating students (n=129), alumni one year after graduation (n=39), and alumni three or more years post-graduation (n=15). Interviews were conducted with students at the time of graduation (n=48), 12-18 months after graduation (n=27), and three or more years post-graduation (n=10).

Results of the evaluation indicate that the lives of Clemente alumni and their families were positively affected by Clemente (Rosi, 2011). The stated goals of the course (e.g., facilitate learning about humanities; provide transferrable credit; enhance students’ self-esteem, sense of self-efficacy, and self-confidence; promote intellectual development; improve students’ ability to take control of their lives and help their families) were achieved by most alumni at each of the three time points. Three or more years after graduation, the course continued to positively affect most students’ self-confidence and helped them foster a connection to the humanities. Most

Clemente alumni pursued their own educational and life goals three or more years after graduating, and 70% of alumni interviewed had completed college courses at community or four year colleges. Despite a relatively small sample, the evaluation concluded that “countless lives have been changed by Clemente as the data has indicated – as the course begins, at the time of graduation, 12-18 months after they have graduated and three or more years after graduation from the Clemente course” (Rosi, 2011, p. 66).

In 2014-2015, the Clemente Course in the Humanities commissioned a national pilot survey of course participants. Approximately 160 graduating participants from 14 of the 24 programs in the US completed surveys administered by local site directors during the spring of 2015. Overall, the findings from the pilot survey indicate benefits to students in terms of skills and confidence. Significant change was reported in students’ comfort with verbal and written communication with people in positions of authority (e.g., supervisors, school personnel, public officials).

Additionally, the largest reported improvements across the survey were in the domains of academic motivation, preparation, and confidence, which indicate the course could positively impact participants’ pursuit of additional education. For example, the percentage of participants reporting they were “quite” or “highly” motivated to apply for admission to college after completing the course increased from 33% before the course to 83% after the course. Just a quarter of participants reported feeling confident about their ability to successfully undertake college-level work before the course, but over 90% reported they were “quite” or “highly” confident in their abilities after the course. The average increase for this question was the highest of all survey questions. These findings are supported by participant reports that the course helped them to develop higher-order academic and thinking skills and inspired attitudinal changes.

There are a number of limitations to this pilot evaluation, however. Because Clemente programs are run with a great deal of autonomy, implementation of a national program-wide evaluation is challenging. One cannot be certain what language was used to describe the evaluation to participants (e.g., some sites were more enthusiastic than others), and the degree to which surveys were administered under uniform circumstances is unclear. For example, I was in a classroom where a staff member referred to the surveys as something that the site was being begrudgingly “made” to do by Clemente and commented to students, “What does somebody in [location where surveys were sent for analysis] know about our class anyway?” The staff member also referred to writing prompts sent for the evaluation as “silly.” While I think that the staff member saw the comments as benign, it is quite possible that some students may have internalized the staff member’s thoughts and feelings about the evaluation and that may have carried over into the time, effort, and truthfulness they put into their responses.

Additionally, data for the pilot evaluation were not collected from the lone Spanish language course, located in Chicago, because the instruments were written in English. The survey relied on self-reported data in a retrospective post-then-pre format and is therefore subject to limitations: inaccurate memories; social desirability bias (participants answer in a way that will likely be viewed favorably by others); effort justification bias (participants may report improvement to justify the time and energy they’ve invested); and cognitive dissonance (participants may report improvement, even if it didn’t occur, to meet their own expectation that they *should have* changed). Despite these limitations, consistent anecdotal evidence coupled with the survey results point to a relationship between participation in the course and positive student outcomes. It should be noted that gathering longitudinal data from Clemente participants would be ideal but is largely impractical due to students’ high mobility and the Clemente

program's resource limitations.

Despite generally favorable evaluations and consistently positive anecdotal evidence from students and staff, there are criticisms of the Clemente program. Kevin Mattson (2002), a professor of contemporary history at Ohio University and former Clemente history teacher, argues that the course fails as a poverty intervention – “The damage done by poverty demands much more than a small program like the Clemente Course can offer” – and instead calls for government programs to address economic inequality (p. 83). Ng (2006) takes similar issue with Clemente as a poverty reform measure and takes particular issue with admissions criteria:

It [Clemente] offers relatively little that is new or transformative from the historical “underclass” remedies, save an education in the humanities ... The stated intent of the Clemente Course is to benefit the poor, but in reality only a narrowly defined group of those who suffer from the effects of poverty are eligible. (p. 52)

The admissions criteria today are much the same as when Shorris established the course; prospective students must be able to read at a very basic level, must live in a low-income household, and, in most cases, must be 18 or older. With these requirements, it seems only minors, those exceeding the income requirements, and those who are functionally illiterate would be excluded from consideration. Indeed, there are applications and interviews one must complete for admission, but there are a limited number of seats in any given Clemente course and to have no admission criteria at all would likely do more harm than good.

Like Mattson (2002) and Ng (2006), John Marsh, associate professor of English at Penn State and former director of the Urbana-Champaign, Illinois, Odyssey Project, argues that the course as an “antipoverty program is misguided at best and self-interested at worst” (p. 212). Marsh (2009) sees the course as part of a larger national trend which contends that the problem

of poverty can be fully solved through education rather than economic policies. Nevertheless, Marsh supports the course not as an antipoverty strategy but as a means of equalizing opportunities for higher education and providing the less tangible benefits of college. On the point of Clemente failing as a poverty intervention, both Mattson and Marsh seems to present the infamous either/or option – *either* we address poverty structurally *or* we address it on an individual level. It is unclear why poverty can't be addressed on both levels simultaneously, and why Clemente can't act as one small cog in the wheel of poverty reduction.

Finally, a search for “Clemente Course” in the full text of English-language doctoral dissertations on ProQuest garnered 20 results dating from 2001 to 2013, just three of which actually explored the topic of free humanities programs for low-income adults. A 2013 mixed-methods dissertation examined the degree to which a Charleston, South Carolina, Clemente course increased college access among its graduates (Doyle). Twenty-two current and former students completed surveys, and 20 faculty and current and former students were interviewed. Results of surveys and interviews indicate that the program had a “substantial impact on the college-going rate of the population served,” and the program also increased participants’ self-esteem and confidence (63.6% of survey takers indicated that they achieved both through Clemente), and about 59% of survey takers believed that their participation led to becoming more engaged and active citizens (Doyle, 2013, p. 58).

A 2011 dissertation, *Creating Spaces for Dialogue: Participatory Action Research in Free Humanities Programs in Canada*, employed Participatory Action Research (PAR) methodology, whereby directors of Free Humanities programs collaborated to “research, act, and reflect on the challenges and rewards of Clemente-inspired programs in Canada” (Meredith, 2011, p. iii). The directors identified common issues they experienced, from securing sustained

funding to responding to academic and other student needs, and, after roughly a year of dialogue and reflection with one another, presented collectively (n=5) in a Canadian liberal arts conference in 2010. While the Clemente-inspired programs recognized and to some degree lessened the economic and social barriers of their students, the program directors themselves contended with many of the same barriers in their struggle to sustain free humanities courses (Meredith, 2011).

### **Models of Adult Education for Liberation and Citizenship**

**Danish Folk Schools.** Freire's thinking is evident in various ways within the practice of adult education, but perhaps most true to his intent is the work of the Highlander School (now the Highlander Research and Education Center) in New Market, Tennessee, and, more generally, the Danish folk schools that preceded him. Folkehøgskole (folk schools) emerged during a period of significant cultural, political, and social upheaval in Denmark. Following Napoleon's defeat, Denmark came under German domination during the first part of the nineteenth century. While the Danish upper classes embraced German customs and language and expressed little interest in preserving the rural peasantry and its culture, a strong nationalist revolt against the German domination of Danish culture, language, and schools emerged among the rural "folk" (Kohl, 1991).

N.F.S. Grundtvig, a Danish scholar, theologian, and central figure in the revolt, observed the increasing chasm between the urban elite and the rural peasants and took particular issue with elitist schools, which he called "schools for death." He envisioned a different sort of education – "schools for life" – that would embrace the idea of folkelighed (literally translated as "equality within a people") and provide an equitable education for peasants and farmers (Kohl, 1991). The language of the schools would be that of the common people and the curriculum would focus on

Danish history, literature, myths, and poems, and students would learn how to discuss cultural, social, and religious issues. Adams (1972) aptly summarizes the schools:

The schools were free of government control. They were unencumbered with grades, ranking, examinations, and certifying students. ... Anyone eighteen or older could attend. Those who came supported the schools in whatever way possible – work at the school, food from their farms, money, if they had it. They stayed as long as they were able. ... The lectures were often repeated in the evening for older people who came into the lecture halls from the countryside. (p. 501)

Schools based on these principles, Grundtvig argued, would provide the lower classes with the education required to actively participate in modern democratic society. In *The Meaning of Adult Education*, Lindeman (1926) wrote enthusiastically about the study circles characteristic of Danish folk schools and proposed the discussion circle as “the setting for adult education, the modern quest for life’s meaning” (p. 31). In these settings, discussion was a collaborative method of learning which confirmed the democratic nature of adult education.

Grundtvigian philosophy took root among the common people and spurred the opening of the first Danish folk school in 1844. Today, there are about 70 folkehojskole across Denmark open to adults aged 17.5 and older regardless of their educational history and, although folk school curricula have been affected by contemporary cultural, social, and technological influences, the schools are still considered “Grundtvigian” in the sense that they focus on enlightenment, ethics, morality, and democracy (Folk high schools, n.d.). Interestingly, and in stark contrast to American adult education, every folk school is publicly funded to about 50% of its operational costs on certain conditions; among them, no vocational skills are to be taught, no marks or grades are to be awarded, and at least half of the syllabus must focus on activities the

school can defend as “general, liberal, mind broadening” education (Collins, 2013, p. 338). The Danish movement subsequently inspired the development of folk schools in Scandinavia and, to a more limited degree, America.

**Citizenship Schools.** Citizenship Schools were an adult education program initiated in 1957 with a particular focus on African American adult literacy (Levine, 2004; Rachal, 1998; Tjerandersen, 1980). In the 1950s, Highlander Folk School, an adult residential school without formal courses or a planned curriculum, aimed at providing a democratic education to the impoverished adults of the Appalachian Mountains, brought together African American and white southerners in desegregation workshops wherein participants identified problems and shared dilemmas in their communities (Hale, 2007; Horton, 1971/1989). In the hopes of addressing the problems associated with community literacy education in the Sea Islands of South Carolina, Septima Clark, a school teacher, and Esau Jenkins, a farmer and bus driver, attended a workshop at Highlander in 1954 (Levine, 2004). Voter registration laws in South Carolina, as in most southern states, required applicants to pass a literacy test, thus making it exceptionally difficult for African Americans to register to vote. In response to these conditions, Clark and Jenkins, with the support of Highlander, soon thereafter planned the first Citizenship School focused on literacy education.

The historic neglect of Black education on the four Sea Islands near Charleston meant that when the School began, a high proportion of adults needed and were enthusiastic to obtain literacy instruction (Levine, 2004). The first School’s teacher was Septima Clark’s cousin, Bernice Robinson, a beautician and active member of the NAACP, who based the curriculum on what the initial 14 adult students wanted to learn: “how to write their name, how to read the words of the South Carolina election laws ... how to spell those words ... how to fill in blanks

when they were ordering out of a catalog ... how to fill in a money order” (Clark, 1960, as cited in Horton, 1971/1989, p. 223). Robinson saw her students as, “Anxious to learn ... I have never before in my life seen such anxious people. They really want to learn and are so proud of the little gains they have made” (Horton, 1971/1989, p. 224). Interest in the school grew and spread to adjacent islands and, with time, the curriculum expanded to include community development and teacher training (Tjerandersen, 1980). By the project’s end in 1970, roughly 2,500 African Americans had taught basic literacy and political education classes to tens of thousands of their neighbors (Horton, 1971/1989; Levine, 2004). In a report to the Board of Directors of Highlander in 1965, Septima Clark reported that the Citizenship Schools had educated more than 25,000 students to date and were responsible for more than 50,000 registered Black voters in the South (Clark, 1965).

The Citizenship Schools, while a decentralized operation, reflected pedagogical experimentation and student-centeredness (Horton, 1971/1989; Levine, 2004). To Robinson, “If a program is to work, the people must have the power of making decisions about what they want to do” (Levine, 2004, p. 406). Underlying this pedagogy was a fundamental respect for the students and a belief in their capacity for intellectual growth. Levine (2004) argues that illiteracy enforced a “double oppression” of African Americans; it denied them participation in civic life and diminished their self-worth (p. 407). The Schools countered this oppression by focusing on the strengths and potential of their adult students. Jenkins best explained how the Schools’ strengths-based approach was not misguided:

Sometimes we underestimate these people and forget that they have something we really need. There are people who haven’t got a college education or even a high school education. But anyone able to raise twelve children – and raise ’em healthy too – must

know something good. They were smart enough to plant and to raise the kind of thing the children need. They raised their own hogs, they raised their cows, they had the milk with the vitamin D that they need. Some of these older people thought very deeply. Mother-wit and faith in God helped them to do a lot, and some achieved more than some of the young people who have been able to go to college. (Carawan, 1994, p. 38)

Citizenship Schools ultimately used literacy as a tool for community education and political mobilization so that all members of society might be able to fully participate as democratic citizens (Schneider, 2007). Just as the Citizenship Schools aimed to raise island residents' awareness of their oppression, Clemente courses seek to spur students' reflection on their lives and the world around them.

**People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos.** Combining the Citizenship Schools' emphasis on literacy with Clemente's emphasis on literature is People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos, a program that for over 40 years has organized groups of disenfranchised adults in community settings to listen to short stories read aloud. The impetus of the program lies in a 1969 seminar led by Paulo Freire at Harvard University. It was there that the program's founder, Sarah Hirschman, became acquainted with the idea of conscientization and subsequently began to ask herself: "Could a literary text stimulate the imagination and set in motion a number of links to some private experiences? And could members of a group who read and discuss a story together transform these deeply felt reactions into ... a dialogue?" (pp. 12-13). In short, Hirschman wondered if reading and discussing a short story could have a positive impact on the quality of life of the disadvantaged (Allen, as cited in Hirschman, 2009). Following a successful pilot project with a group of Puerto Rican women in Cambridge, Massachusetts, the program expanded into English and across the US and Latin America (Goodnough, 1996, n.p.).

The program is typically held in non-academic and non-literary venues – prisons, shelters, church basements, and rehab centers – where a group of up to 20 listen to a short story read aloud by a trained facilitator (Schwartz, 2011). After reading the story, the coordinator invites participants to reflect on questions and share their understanding of the text (Hirschman, 2009). Anndee Hochman (2002), a People & Stories coordinator at a women’s inpatient rehab facility, explains:

People & Stories aims to prove wrong the notion that serious literature is only for people with advanced degrees and disposable income. Facilitators like me bring short stories into prisons, senior centers, halfway houses, homeless shelters, libraries, and learning centers. The model is simple: Gather a group, read a short story aloud, then pose questions designed to lift the story’s skin and reveal its heart. (n.p.)

There are very few substantive writings about People & Stories/Gente y Cuentos and no published program evaluations exist. According to the 2014 Impact Report on the program’s website, People & Stories served 956 participants across 55 programs. Participants completed a post-program survey and a “retro-pre” survey that allowed them to retrospectively assess their understanding of the program. Results of the surveys reveal that each of the four major participant groups (community, youth, seniors, re-entry/prison) demonstrated increases on every metric: self-esteem, literacy, critical thinking, cultural appreciation/tolerance, personal expression, social participation/responsiveness to others, and well-being. However, statistical significance of the increases from pre- to post-program are unknown and one must bear in mind the inherent weaknesses of self-reported data, particularly retrospective self-reports (People & Stories, n.d.).

The program is unique among literature discussion programs because it spurs

conversation among voices that are often silenced. Hirschman (2009) writes that Freire “always liked the Gente y Cuentos concept,” but some of his devotees were, and are, more doctrinaire than he (p. 13). They object to the short stories as being too remote and complex for disenfranchised groups whose concerns are seemingly far removed from literature. The works, detractors argue, are creations of a “high culture” antithetical to conscientization and critical reflection (Hirschman, 2009; People & Stories, n.d.).

Hirschman (2009) championed the power of literature’s “poetics” to unlock the imagination, “which begins to splinter and recast what it encounters” in group dialogue (p. 38; Schwartz, 2011). The unlocked imagination, then, becomes a strategy for mutual understanding, particularly to “facilitate contacts between groups that feel estranged” from each another, to surmount distrust, and to deconstruct stereotypes (Schwartz, 2011). Group reading and discussion become an experience where “[d]ifference is now perceived as strength rather than weakness” (Hirschman, 2009, p. 88).

**Bard Prison Initiative.** Since its inception, the Clemente Course has been under the “academic aegis” of Bard College, an institution that seeks to “strengthen the importance of the liberal arts in public life” (Shorris, 1997a, p. 136; BPI, n.d.). Though it holds much in common with People & Stories, Clemente is not purely a literature course. In many ways, it more closely mirrors Bard’s prison education project known as the Bard Prison Initiative (BPI), which offers full-time liberal arts education (leading to associate’s and bachelor’s degrees) to prisoners in six medium- and maximum-security prisons across New York State (BPI, n.d.). Established as an official academic program of Bard in 2001, and granting its first degrees in 2005, BPI currently enrolls nearly 275 incarcerated women and men across the six sites. (BPI, n.d.).

There are well over two million people currently incarcerated in the US, but only a few

dozen programs actually award college degrees to prisoners (Buruma, 2005; Kamenetz, 2014). BPI is considerably more selective and arguably more rigorous than Clemente and People & Stories. BPI applicants must have a high school diploma or its equivalent, and the admissions process involves both a written essay and an intensive personal interview (Adler, 2014; BPI, n.d.). Students must also complete a senior thesis of original research, which is no small feat given the restrictions of prison (Adler, 2014). Admission to BPI is also more competitive, as there are typically 10 applications for each available seat (BPI, n.d.). The courses and instruction, however, bear a striking resemblance to Clemente. Professors come from Bard, as well as Columbia, Harvard, MIT, Vassar, and local community colleges, and curriculum runs the gamut from advanced mathematics to literature to social sciences (Adler, 2014; Neyfakh, 2015).

BPI operates in sharp contrast to most prison programs grounded in correction and behavioral modification – programs that emphasize concepts like individual change and forgiveness and are often rooted in religious or therapeutic models (Karpowitz, 2005). The goal of BPI is not individual rehabilitation, reducing recidivism, or preparing inmates for employment, although those may be by-products of the program. BPI frames its mission in terms of economic justice – to restore higher education to New York’s prisons, thus making a liberal education available to those most isolated from the opportunity (Karpowitz, 2005). To dissenters, a liberal education does not have a direct and obvious contribution to the workforce and is thus seen as superfluous (Page, 2004). Conversely, BPI, like Clemente but unlike most adult education programs, sees an education in the liberal arts as practical. Max Kenner, the founder of BPI, notes that the program frequently encounters proponents of vocational, religious, and therapeutic programs who question the relevance of liberal education to inmates:

People are always saying, “Why not do vocational education, or spiritual inspiration, or

anti-violence programs?” Everyone has a bad idea about what people they know nothing about need. If you believe that society is not training people for jobs in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, that we are producing a mathematically, scientifically and philosophically illiterate population, then you would want to make this kind of education available to as many people as possible. (Adler, 2014, n. p.)

In an interview with National Public Radio’s (NPR) “All Things Considered,” Donnell Hughes, a BPI alumnus who spent 20 years in prison, echoed Kenner’s sentiments, noting the influence of liberal education in his post-prison life:

I’m in a position, because of Bard, to be able to really see the world in the way that I should have seen it years ago. That’s what a liberal arts education can really do for a person such as myself, or anybody who is trying to find their own way in life. (Kamenetz, 2014, n.p.)

A 2013 Rand Corporation report found that, in general, inmates who participated in a prison education program were 43% less likely to recidivate within three years than those who did not (Davis et al., 2013). Among BPI graduates who have been released from prison, less than 4% have been rearrested (Adler, 2014; Kamenetz, 2014). However, it should be noted that BPI statistics are unaudited, most of the 300 inmates who have received Bard degrees since 2001 are still incarcerated, and those who apply, enroll, and persist in BPI are self-selected for high motivation (Adler, 2014). Of course, it is not a lack of irrefutable data that keeps liberal education programs from proliferating in American prisons. Like Clemente and People & Stories participants who are largely low-income people of color, prisoners are seen as “less deserving” of education in general and a liberal education in particular.

**Changing Lives Through Literature.** A final program bearing ideological similarities

to Clemente is Changing Lives Through Literature (CLTL), an alternative sentencing program based on the idea that “literature has the power to transform lives by enabling criminal offenders to gain insight into their lives and reassess their behavior” (CLTL, n.d.). CLTL was designed as an alternative to incarceration in the fall of 1991 by Robert Waxler, literature professor at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (UMD); a judge, Robert Kane; and a probation officer, Wayne St. Pierre. Concerned about the lack of “real success” by prisons to “reform offenders and affect their patterns of behavior,” the three devised a plan (CLTL, n.d.). As an alternative to sentencing, participants could voluntarily participate in a 12-week modern American literature seminar held on the UMD campus. Waxler would lead the seminar and the judge and probation officer would also attend and participate (CLTL, n.d.; Jablecki, 1998; Trounstine, 2007). The plan to hold the seminar on a college campus was deliberate. Unlike Clemente courses in the US, People & Stories, and BPI, CLTL meets primarily on college campuses to reinforce the idea that participants deserve higher education and belong on campus (CLTL, n.d.)

Together, the group discusses short stories and major works of literature in which characters wrestle with issues of identity, violence, the role of the individual in society, and authority – e.g., Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*, and Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (Jablecki, 1998). The bar for success is far lower than that for Clemente and BPI participants. There are no grades and no pass/fail hurdle; if participants attend without absence, they graduate (Stoehr, 2006).

A 1993 evaluation of CLTL in New Bedford, Massachusetts, concluded that it had a positive impact on recidivism (Jarjoura & Krumholz, 1998). Reconviction rates within three years were lower for the program’s first 30 participants (18.75%) than a matched comparison group of 40 probationers (45%) (Jarjoura & Krumholz, 1998). However, such a limited sample

size does not permit overwhelming confidence in the study's findings, and it is not entirely clear that the differences can be attributed to the specific books and stories that were read, to the experience itself, or to something else entirely (Katzev et al., 2009).

Schutt, Deng, and Stoehr (2013) extended Jarjoura and Krumholz's (1998) study by using a larger sample, more jurisdictions, and a longer follow-up period to test the impact of CLTL on recidivism (Schutt, Deng, & Stoehr, 2013). Schutt et al. (2013) compared rates of recidivism between probationers who participated in CLTL (n=604) and a random control sample of potentially eligible probationers in the same jurisdictions and time periods (n=614). After accounting for characteristics that predicted program involvement, CLTL participation was associated with a reduction in participants' number and severity of criminal incidents compared to the control group. The relationship between CLTL participation and lower recidivism was independent of other individual characteristics that influence criminal inclinations, and lower recidivism was present in each jurisdiction in which the program was offered, thus suggesting that the association is likely replicable in other settings. The surprising lack of interaction effects with offender characteristics suggests that the benefits are not restricted to a particular type of person, although the participants were selected in part due to their likelihood of reoffending (Schutt et al., 2013).

## **Conclusion**

Adult educators have long debated the "appropriate" role for adult education (Imel, 1999, p. 1). Should the field "actively promote continuous societal change by promoting the ideals of participatory democracy defined as full citizen participation, freedom, equality and social justice" (Cunningham 1996, p. 1) or should adult educators support existing social, economic, and political systems (Baptiste, 1998; Barr, 1999; Foley, 1998)?

Citizenship Schools clearly involved students in curriculum development and in political critique, whereas the curricula and literature choices of People & Stories, BPI, CLTL, and Clemente are established by instructors and course directors without student input, though in the cases of People & Stories and CLTL, readings are chosen that *relate* to students' race/ethnicity, social location, and/or particular circumstances. The Citizenship Schools set an important tone of respect and appreciation for their adult students' strengths and life experiences, thus denying the "banking" idea that the "teacher knows everything and the students know nothing" (Freire, 1970, p. 73). Similarly, anecdotal evidence reveals that many CLTL participants perceive themselves to be on equal footing with their instructors and peers, and testimonials from People & Stories participants indicate that they feel comfortable expressing their ideas and believe their ideas are important.

Each program touts critical reflection as an important outcome, though the current state of research, coupled with participant self-selection, make it difficult to know if the programs do in fact raise students' critical consciousness, how much, in what ways, and for how long. More than any of the aforementioned programs, Citizenship Schools aimed to give students the tools (namely, the ability to read and write) to comprehend the written world around them and use their literacy to affect social change by voting, teaching others, cultivating community leadership, and so on. Indeed, the Schools reached thousands of disenfranchised African Americans and likely changed the course of history.

People & Stories was established based purely on Freire's ideas. Hirschman, like Shorris, believed that engagement with literature could lead students to more deeply reflect on their own circumstances and the world around them. Although the program's most recent participant survey results reveal that *all* students self-report increases on *all* metrics, additional,

rigorous research is needed (People & Stories, 2014). Statistical significance of the increases from pre- to post-program are unknown and one must bear in mind the inherent weaknesses of self-reported data, particularly retrospective self-reports, when not triangulated with additional data.

BPI similarly views a liberal education as a tool to spur reflection, but in the absence of in-depth pre- and post-program evaluations, and in light of the fact that most graduates remain incarcerated, it is again difficult at present to gauge the degree to which BPI engenders critical thought and sociopolitical action among its students. Meaningful program evaluation is lacking. Finally, CLTL focuses on recidivism as an outcome measure, and the two program evaluations reflect that interest. While participants, probation officers, and judges *do* engage in dialogue, and while the program emphasizes the “transformative” power of literature, the focus of the program is less on Freirean ideals and far more on individual change, rehabilitation, and desistence from crime.

Qualitative and anecdotal evidence clearly suggests that these programs have meaningful, positive impacts on many participants who persist. It is likewise clear that it is futile to think of any of these programs as poverty-reduction mechanisms when not used in concert with some other intervention or unless they’re administered to some predisposed sub-population. Perhaps most importantly, these programs suggest that there are reasons for developing human capital among the poor *other than* reducing material poverty. This dissertation, which looks specifically at Clemente courses, explores some of those reasons.

### CHAPTER 3: Methods

Curious about the relationship between students' participation in Clemente and any change or development they might experience, I spent two academic years attending class two nights a week at course sites located in a midwestern city (2014-2015) and a northeastern city (2015-2016). I immersed myself in the student experience and accompanied students on field trips to plays, museums, concerts, walking tours, and poetry readings, among other activities. I also volunteered as a writing tutor for students, and would frequently come to class early to work with students on their assignments. This work of participant observation, coupled with in-depth interviews of students, faculty, and staff, put me at the heart of Clemente activities.

#### **Critical Ethnography**

This study is an ethnography, a method that allows the researcher to study a cultural group or particular phenomenon in a naturalistic setting, using primarily participant-observational data and interviews to gather information over an extended period of time (Madison, 2005; Patillo-McCoy, 2000; Valenzuela, 1999). The collection of data while immersed as part of a culture and social system results in thick description of people and their environment (Heath & Street, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). A particularly important advantage of ethnography is that research is fairly flexible and allows the realities of participants to emerge and evolve in their natural context (Creswell, 2003). Employing ethnographic methods in this study afforded me access to Clemente students' natural context (primarily the classroom) and allowed me to observe and interact with participants in a way that didn't seem unnecessarily forced or artificial.

Ethnography, however, seeks merely to describe and explain a specific culture or group, and this project moves a step beyond that – to *critical* ethnography (Taylor, Kermode, &

Roberts, 2007). Critical ethnography derives from research approaches that recognize that society dominates individuals either overtly or covertly and, rather than simply *identifying* the imbalance, seeks to foster social change (Carspecken, 1996; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; LeCompte & Schensul, 1999; Smyth & Holmes, 2005; Thomas, 1993). More specifically, critical ethnography begins with an ethical responsibility to address processes of unfairness or injustice within a particular lived domain. Madison (2012) defines this “ethical responsibility,” as “a compelling sense of duty and commitment based on moral principles of human freedom and well-being, and hence a compassion for the suffering of living beings” (p. 5). The conditions for existence within a particular context are not as they could be for specific subjects; as a result, the researcher feels an obligation to contribute to changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity (Madison, 2012).

Given that adult education is marked by layers of inequalities, from how schools are staffed and funded to the kinds of courses and resources available to low-income adult students, and the kinds of beliefs people hold about their abilities, the analysis and transformation of inequalities are of particular importance for adult education research. Following Madison (2012), I, as a student of the humanities, education, and social work, feel a moral obligation to contribute to changing these adverse conditions toward greater equity: “The critical ethnographer resists domestication and moves from ‘what is’ to ‘what could be’” (Madison, 2012, p. 5; Carspecken, 1996; Denzin, 2001; Noblit, Flores, & Murillo, 2004; Thomas, 1993). This study not only illuminates the experiences of Clemente students, but also provides evidence that non-vocational, non-GED programs like Clemente are valued by many low-income adult students and fill a void in their communities. Funding for public humanities programs like Clemente is as uncertain as ever, and this ethnography provides an argument and evidence in favor of such programs. I aim

for this project to be more than a document of students' experiences. I hope that the results can be useful in advocacy and funding for the course so that conditions may continue to shift toward greater educational equity for historically marginalized adult learners.

Because critical ethnography is a methodology for conducting research focused on “transformation, empowerment, and social justice,” it is important to bear in mind that it is grounded in a social-constructivist epistemological framework in which knowledge generation is understood as an “active, context-based process influenced by the values, histories, and practices of the researcher and of the community in which the research is conducted” (Barton, 2001, p. 905; Atwater, 1996; Pizarro, 1998). Critical ethnography emerged in the education research literature in the 1980s as a fusion of critical theory and ethnography in response to conducting empirical research in an unjust world (Barton, 2001; Nobilt, 1999). At the time, ethnography was being challenged as overly functional, too apolitical, and overrun with hegemonic practices and methods (Anderson, 1989; Lather, 1991). Critical theory, on the other hand, was labeled as overly idealistic and lacking an empirical method (Anderson, 1989; Nobilt, 1999). The merger of the two allowed ethnography to move into the political realm and critical theory to develop an empirical basis. Barton (2001) identifies four major principles of critical ethnography:

- (1) Critical ethnography is situated within the belief that all education and research is fundamentally political and steeped in cultural beliefs and values.
- (2) Critical ethnography is based on a vision of praxis centrally about a “political commitment to struggle for liberation and in defense of human rights” (Trueba, 1999, p. 593).
- (3) Research is framed through the agency of the researcher and the researched. All participants can, and should, act for themselves and others.

(4) Critical ethnography supports the oppressed in ways that embrace their histories, cultures, and epistemologies. (pp. 906-907)

At its core, critical ethnography is focused on documenting oppression and empowerment, “accelerating the conscientization of the oppressed and the oppressors,” and “sensitizing the research community to the implications of research for quality of life” (Trueba, 1999, p. 593). In the case of this study, critical ethnography is used to document the oppression and empowerment of the students and, in many cases, the positives changes students experience and attribute to Clemente.

### **Study Design**

Data for this project were gathered from several sources:

(1) Approximately 400 hours of participant observation of two urban course sites, as well as class trips and related events, tutoring sessions, faculty meetings, and annual retreats.

(2) Informal conversations and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with students and graduates (n=10), drop outs (n=2), and staff (n=10) at the course site in the midwest.

Students in the 2014-2015 cohort were interviewed following graduation, during the summer of 2015, and again one year later, during the summer of 2016.

(3) Informal conversations and semi-structured, in-depth interviews with students and graduates (n=24), drop outs (n=3), and staff (n=6) at the course site in the northeast.

Students in the 2015-2016 cohort were interviewed during the fall of 2015 shortly after class had begun, again during the summer of 2016, and briefly during the early fall of 2017.

(3) Telephone interviews with students and graduates (n=37) at course sites other than my two field sites in the midwest and northeast.

(4) Telephone interviews with staff (n=24) at course sites other than other than my field sites.

(5) Publically available secondary data sources, such as course websites, newsletters, and Facebook pages.

In total, I conducted 150 interviews (including follow-ups with graduates from my field sites in the midwest and northeast) with 116 individuals. Interviews ranged from half an hour to two and a half hours; interviews averaged a little over an hour.

### **Selection and Description of the Sites and Participants**

The midwest course site was initially chosen as a study site due to its location, my familiarity with the neighborhood in which it was located, and my relationships with the course's American history instructor, who allowed me to observe classes during the 2013-2014 academic year, and the course coordinator, with whom I met in 2013 and corresponded about my interest through the summer of 2014. Unfortunately, the midwest course site, which has a long, largely successful history, suffered from significant attrition during the 2014-2015 year, beginning with 20 (14 women and 6 men) and ending with just six (five women and one man) students.

Concerned about the future of the midwest course and the possibility of another small sample, I approached the director of a course in the northeast during the spring of 2015 and visited the course, which at the time was in its second year. The classes I observed had high attendance and reflected the rigor and enthusiasm I had come to associate with Clemente classes. The director and staff at the northeast course site welcomed me as a researcher during the 2015-2016 year. Both courses took place in community-based organizations in predominately African American neighborhoods, in nondescript conference-type rooms which were outfitted with the basics required to run a class – tables and chairs, chart paper and white boards, and a projector –

but not much more.

Students at both field sites were made aware of my role, my research project, and the fact that I would be attending their classes and observing them throughout the year, on the first day of class. Both the directors and I spoke to students about my research project, and I reiterated to students that no one was under any obligation to interact or speak with me at any time unless they wanted to, and I made clear that they would not be penalized in the course if they chose not to participate in my project. I also used that opportunity to let students know that I hoped to interview everyone at some point, but I would speak to them individually, and at a later date, about scheduling interviews. I told students that if they didn't wish for their words or actions to be a part of my field notes, to let me know and I would omit them. I also conveyed to the students that my notes were essentially an open book and, as a sign of transparency, I would be happy to show anyone my notes or what I was typing or writing at any given point. No students ever took me up on this offer per se, though there was an instance when a student stopped me after class and asked me if I type "everything we say." The following is an excerpt from my field notes recounting the exchange:

We had a joint class tonight of the second-year Bridge class and the first-year class. It was the last class before the holiday break, and there was a big meal and we read "A Christmas Carol." The room was absolutely *packed* with students, and most of the Bridge students were seated in chairs at the back of the room, while the first-years were, for the most part, seated at the tables. There were Bridge students seated behind me during the class. I usually sit at a table with my back to the wall so my typing or note taking isn't distracting to anyone but that wasn't possible tonight.

As class ends, I start packing up my iPad when Vee, a Bridge student who was seated behind me, comes over and says, "I saw you typing all through class! I was wondering to myself, 'Does she type everything we say or just certain things that happen?'" Gloria and Paula are packing up too, getting their coats on, but I can tell they're also listening. I say to Vee that it depends, but I'll read you what I wrote at the end of class so you can see. I get my iPad out of my bag and pull up my notes. I say, "Here's what I have" and read to her from the screen:

There's a cell phone ringing and Professor Martin asks Jalisa to turn it off. Evie and Gloria are reading aloud, switching between Scrooge and Marley. As soon as

they finish, Rick blurts out, “I found a part I can do by himself! Can I do it?” All the students laugh. It’s almost the end of class and all the reading tonight has more or less been in pairs. It’s also clear Rick’s been looking for a passage he can ‘perform’ rather than following along while Evie and Gloria were reading.

Professor Martin says, “Yes.”

Rick stands up at his seat, which no one else has done, and reads the passage. It is a passage with two characters, and he reads them in two different, and very dramatic, voices. Everyone claps when he finishes, and he sits down again.

Then Tisha and Professor Martin read, each taking a different character.

Gloria, who’s beside me, says something under her breath that I don’t catch.

Fabiola whispers to her, “You’re a mess.”

Professor Martin thanks Tisha, continues reading, and finishes “A Christmas Carol.”

Vee, Gloria, and Paula stand there as I read through the notes, holding the screen so they can see it. When I’m finished we all laugh; it’s funny to them to hear a play-by-play of what happened just two minutes prior. I say, “See? It’s pretty basic. I go back and add my thoughts later.” Vee says, “Oh I got you, I got you. I think this project you’re doing is so cool. You are working hard, girl!”

Also with regard to my notes, students would often turn to me if something particularly poignant, heated, or, more often, funny happened in class and say, “Did you get that?” or “I hope you got *that* in your notes!” As an example, during a political science class, discussion turned to voting and the following dialogue ensued, as I recorded in my field notes:

Rick: I don’t believe that our opinions really matter to the higher ups.

Winston: Maybe it’s not necessary to vote for the president, but the local elections are important. Take [New York Governor] Cuomo yesterday and going to the \$15 minimum wage – that’s a big thing. If I’m in Colorado and I wanna smoke a joint, I gotta *vote* for that.

Rick: I’ve never voted, in my whole life I’ve never voted, and I can’t vote until I’m off parole.

Luisa: Is that *for real*?

Luisa is posing the question to the class. Several different students interject, “Yes,” “Mm-hmm, he’s a felon.” Rick doesn’t answer her.

Rick: My single vote is not gonna make a difference. I think this whole voting thing is a bunch of doo doo.

Tisha is seated across from me. She turns towards me, smiles, and points to Rick.

Tisha:           Better put *that* in your notes!

To recruit interview participants, I approached students and staff at both field sites individually, usually before or after class, or during a class break. I explained that I'd like to speak with them, at their convenience, about their experiences to that point and explained the confidential nature of the interview. No one declined directly to my face. In fact, everyone I asked agreed to an interview and shared their contact information with me and/or took mine. In a couple cases, a student and I were unable to find a common time to talk or, more often, I couldn't reach them during the time we had agreed upon – their phone might've been disconnected, for example, or they forgot about the interview altogether. In those instances, I would follow up with the student before or after class to reschedule a time for the interview. After three or so failed attempts, though, I would generally let it go. I didn't want to jeopardize in-class comradery and relationship-building by continually asking for an interview, and I didn't want to make any students feel uncomfortable about declining the interview. This happened in six cases; students agreed to an interview but did not follow through for whatever reason. In one of those cases, the student was actively delusional, and I didn't pursue an interview with him after my initial inquiry because of his mental instability.

I contacted staff at other course sites via email to explain my project and set up a time to talk. Because I had attended the annual Clemente directors' retreat, which brings directors from Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses across the US together for a weekend at Bard College, most were already aware of my dissertation and my desire to speak with them. I recruited students from other sites through their directors, who contacted their students and alumni on my behalf, and interested students subsequently emailed, called, or texted me to let me know they were open to being interviewed. This was a roundabout and far from ideal way of recruiting

students from other sites, but there is no national database of Clemente students and alumni from which I could draw, and I did not have access to any students' contact information beyond those in the classes I had been a part of. I likewise recruited students from other sites, as well as graduates of my field sites, via courses' Facebook pages, where I posted a paragraph explaining who I was and that I was interested in interviewing students. Students would likewise contact me through Facebook to express their interest and set up a time to speak. In short, I was able to recruit students at the midwest and northeast course sites face-to-face, which was relatively easy since we were in class together and had developed a rapport, but I was entirely dependent upon course directors and social media to put me in touch with students from other course sites.

Interviewees were given gift cards upon completion of their interview. Students of the northeast course site were given a \$10 gift card from a retailer of their choice for the first interviews. Similarly, I mailed students from other sites a \$10 gift card at the conclusion of our phone interview. Midwest and northeast students were interviewed following graduation, and because those interviews were typically longer and more involved, they were given \$20 gift cards as a token of appreciation for their time. While the idea behind the gift cards was obviously to incentivize talking with me, numerous interviewees stated that they wanted someone else to have their gift card, to "pay it forward," or that they just "wanted to help." To illustrate, as I was wrapping up phone interviews with graduates of other US course sites, the following exchanges took place between the interviewee and myself and were recorded in the interview transcripts:

Charity: I know it's not much, but I have a small grant so I am able to give people who participate in interviews a \$10 gift card.

Khadijah: No, no, you know what you can do for me? I am all about paying it forward. So, the next one [interviewee] you talk to that has young children you hear in the background, offer her a \$20 one.

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Charity: So, I can send you a \$10 gift card, I know it's not much, but I appreciate your time. Is there a particular place you'd like me to get it from?

Jennie: Honestly, there's no need. I just wanted to help out.

Charity: Are you sure?

Jennie: Oh yeah, I'm fine.

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Charity: OK, well, those were all my questions. Is there anything you feel like I missed or anything else you'd like to add?

Tim: No. I know that you said that you provide a gift card for this. All I want to say is that if you're gonna send one out, you just send it to Robert [course director] and just say, "Listen, this is just another way of Tim saying thank you for the course," you know? "You could use it or give it to one of your students who could probably use it as well." It's not necessary to me. ... This right here, this conversation, could happen with or without the gift card.

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Charity: Everybody who does an interview, I'm able to send a \$10 gift card to.

Bruce: Well, if you could send it to Rebecca [course director], there's someone that would need it more than me. I've been so blessed. So, just send it to Clemente and she could use it, someone could use it more than me.

Charity: OK, do you want me to tell her that it came from you?

Bruce: Well, you can, you can just say I've declined the thing. That's kind of you to do that, but there are people that could *really* use it way more than me.

Nearly all of the Clemente students and graduates I interviewed were racial minorities and nearly all of the staff were white, both of which are mirrored in Clemente nationwide. Most Clemente students across the country are women, which mirrors higher education generally, and my sample reflects that. About 72% of the students I interviewed were women, and the sample was 72.4% Black, 11.8% Latina/o, and 15.8% other. Students' ages ranged from 19 to 70, with 40 being the average. Of the staff I spoke with, 72.5% were white, 12.5% Latina/o, 2.5% Black,

and 12.5% other. Most (67.5%) staff members I spoke with were women, though there are more male instructors across Clemente sites nationally. As a national Clemente staff person told me, “Across the country, the faculty is more male and more white than the students – dramatically so” (personal communication, May 15, 2015).

Student recruitment varies across sites, with some sites having a more difficult time than others: “Recruiting is always the most difficult part,” one director said. At the other end of the continuum a director commented, “Well it’s funny because we haven’t had a problem recruiting, and it amazes me that any place would have trouble getting students because they [potential students] just knew about it here, after the first year.” Student word-of-mouth is a frequent recruiting strategy, as the latter director suggests, and both of the classes I was a part of had students who had learned of the course from someone else. But the bulk of the recruiting burden falls on directors’ shoulders, who post flyers in potential students’ neighborhoods; visit social service agencies, libraries, and child care centers; and place ads on radio and television, for example. As directors said:

Alegra: We go to all different social services agencies and leave information. Word-of-mouth is another way that we do our recruitment.

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Heather: We worked with shelters, we worked with low-income programs through ... recovery centers, that was a lot of our referrals. Churches also and that’s generally how we got students. We also advertised in newspapers, for example, in the want ads where a lot of people without internet access look for jobs, the absence of internet access sort of being another indicator of, potentially, of income levels.

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Rebecca: I think part of that [recruitment] is word of mouth because a lot of the people who apply have a relative or a friend or a neighbor in the program. We’ve had good media coverage in terms of articles, TV spots, different things like that, where people hear about it. Then, also, I put applications

out at places like the Salvation Army, the Y, sending material home with parents and Head Starts, and I think another thing that helped ... was the library.

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Tina: We try to contact all of the non-profits in our area – any that we can think of, everything from preschool Head Start trying to reach out to those parents who come for community services, folks that would use the food bank, anything like that. So, I have a list of all those non-profits in the area, and I make a visit each summer and send letters and emails.

There is no one “type” of Clemente student. In her book *Our Declaration*, Danielle Allen (2014), a professor of government at Harvard who taught in Clemente for a decade, recalls that her classes were filled with a range of students with a host of life experiences and hardships: “[Students] were without jobs or working two jobs or stuck in dead-end part-time jobs while nearly always also juggling children’s school schedules, undependable daycare arrangements, and a snarled city bus service” (p. 31). Similarly, participants in this study had varied backgrounds and motivations for pursuing postsecondary education through Clemente. For instance, a grandmother, not much older than 40, with a “passion for culinary arts and creative writing” who “wants to open pastry shop ... and write a book” but whose boyfriend doesn’t share her love of reading and music and thinks she’s a “modern day hippie”; a “creative, musically talented” father of four daughters who plays organ at his church and is “excited and nervous” to expand his learning; a 19-year-old quiet, pensive high school graduate who wants to try out college-level courses without the burden of tuition; a thirty-something woman recommended to the program from a job-placement program; a mid-twenties mother of three boys who works as a mail carrier and has amassed many college credits from a variety of institutions but has never declared a major and isn’t sure what to pursue; a politically active woman who attended one semester of college several years ago and wants to re-start her

education; an unmarried woman with no children who has worked for 24 years as a kindergarten assistant and whose colleague thought she might be interested in the course; an openly gay man in his early forties who sees “learning [as] a tool to liberate” himself from “obstacles”; a formerly incarcerated man who is self-employed as a caterer and whose formal education stopped at around age 13 when his mother died; a single father of two sons, who loves being enriched by new things – “That’s why I’m here”; a 22-year-old college student whose mother completed the course last year and incessantly asked her, “Are you gonna do it? Are you gonna do it?” until she finally relented and applied; a mother of four in her thirties who found it “hypocritical to tell my kids to go to college when I haven’t done it. I want to inspire them because they inspire me”; and a woman who recently left her abusive husband of over a decade and is “starting a fresh life. Everything is different. It’s like I’m transforming.”

Participants come to Clemente through a variety of channels: as the result of seeing a flyer, through word-of-mouth from colleagues, friends, and family (e.g., “Somebody I work with handed me the flyer and said, ‘I think you will be interested in this.’”), and via social service agencies. While students’ self-reported backgrounds indicate that they may be more organizationally and socially connected than their neighbors – participants routinely reference church, their workplaces, their children’s schools, activities they are or have been a part of, and so on – their education levels vary. Some did not graduate high school or earn a GED, others attended a four-year or community college and dropped out (a path typical among several participants), and a *very* select few have earned a four-year college degree. For some participants, their educational trajectories were interrupted by incarceration, homelessness, and familial responsibilities, and, for many participants, defaulted student loans prevented them from re-enrolling in college because until their loans are rehabilitated, they are ineligible for federal

financial aid.

## **Data Collection**

A hallmark of ethnographic research is the use of multiple data sources, a strategy that also enhances data credibility (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2003). I used multiple strategies to gather data in an attempt to strengthen the trustworthiness and credibility of my conclusions.

**Participant Observation.** Participant observation is in some ways both the most natural and the most challenging of qualitative data collection methods. It connects the researcher to the most basic of human experiences, discovering through immersion and participation “the hows and whys of human behavior in a particular context” (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2012, p. 75). Participant observation is natural in that all of us have done it throughout our lives, navigating membership in our own families, cultures, work groups, and personal circles. The challenge of participant observation is that when we are participant observers in a more formal sense, we must systematize and organize a fundamentally fluid process. This means not only being a player in a particular social milieu but also fulfilling the role of researcher, watching and listening carefully, taking notes, and asking questions that are designed to uncover the meaning behind behaviors.

Participant observation is of great significance to this project. Immersion in the Clemente setting allowed me to hear, see, and experience reality as the students do. Without immersion, I would be otherwise unaware of the nuances of students’ experiences throughout the academic year. I often tended more toward observer when in the classroom because I did not want to manipulate, unintentionally or not, the course of the lesson or discussion. However, before and after class, during in-class group activities, and on field trips, my role was more of an active participant. Although students were repeatedly made aware of my role as researcher, there were many instances where some would interact with me as if I were purely another classmate. A few

instances recorded in my field notes reflect this:

Luisa asks if they should read *Oedipus* at home so we can discuss it here? Professor Martin says, “Oh yes! *Always* read before so we can discuss it here.” Some students are saying it’s not in their packets. There’s lots of flipping through papers and rummaging and mumbling going on. Professor Martin goes to ask Pilar, the administrator. He comes back in and says that Pilar gave it to everyone already, which I know is true. I think the students just have too many papers and don’t know what to do with it all. Rick turns to me and asks, “What’s due? I’m confused. Can I call you if I don’t figure this out?” I say yes but immediately wonder if I should have.

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This was my first night back after a week away for a conference. “Oh, I’ve gotta talk to *you*,” Jalisa says as soon as I walk in the classroom. “You’re gone for a week and my life comes apart!”

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It’s the last class for the year and Gloria and Ann-Marie are talking about assignments before class. They were already talking when I came in. After greeting one another, I say, “Oh you guys were talking about assignments? Have you gotten everything done?” Gloria says she spent the weekend typing, says she didn’t leave her apartment, but she’s got everything handed in. Ann-Marie says she’s still working on her philosophy paper. She has five kids, so she can only write once they’ve all gone to bed at night. She says to us, “But I’m going to get it done. There is no other option. I started this, and I am going to finish *everything*.” I tell her I know she will, just to make sure everything is in by graduation. Then Ann-Marie says, “What about you? Did you get everything done?” I’m confused – really confused – but I say, “I don’t do the work, you know, since I’m not a student in the class.” Gloria starts laughing and then so does Ann-Marie. She says, “Oh, you right, you right! I was just talking to you like you was a student like us. I get so used to you sitting with us and being with us all the time.”

Classes were held twice weekly, and while the classes themselves were two hours, I would typically arrive an hour or so early and stay late. Outside events were sometimes scheduled during formal class time but, more often than not, were on other weeknights or weekends. I also acted as a writing tutor for both course sites; sessions were scheduled at the students’ discretion and we would meet either at a coffee shop or the classroom, or talk about assignments over the phone. I volunteered to act as a tutor because I wanted to develop relationships with the students and to become more comfortable in the culture of adult education

(Kozol, 1985; Morse, 2007). As a tutor and regular attendee of classes and related activities, I committed to a “prolonged period of engagement” in the Clemente setting and worked to establish trust and rapport with the students and instructors (Merriam & Simpson, 2000).

Assuming the role of a participant observer in this research was a natural fit and helped me to arrive at deeper insights into students’ experiences in the course as they moved through the year.

Although it was a natural fit, participant observation was not without challenges. I had to regularly remind students that I was a researcher, not simply a classmate, and I had to constantly negotiate my role in the classroom. I wanted to be accepted as a member of the class, which meant participating to some degree, offering my opinions and perspective on various topics, and so on, but I didn’t want to unduly influence the class; I had to maintain a balance between participant and observer. For example, an instructor had a difficult class where a majority of students had not completed the assigned reading and, by his own admission, lost his temper with the class that evening and gave them a very stern, very teacher-centered lecture on what was expected of them. He emailed me a couple days later about the episode and asked my perspective on it. His email, in part, read:

Lastly, given the range of teacher responses to this kind of situation, how would you categorize my response? Do you think I was too stern? It is always hard to gauge the proper response, and I usually produce a blend of stern admonition with a follow-up of understanding (the difficulty of the texts, etc.). Bad-cop, then good-cop. But does it work?

Any experiences that you feel comfortable sharing, from you observations of Clemente classes, as to what works and what doesn’t, will be most appreciated.

Of course I had lots of thoughts about the class and had several ideas about ways he might tweak his pedagogy. I struggled with what to write back, though. If I gave him my suggestions, would I be influencing the course of the class? Would I be manipulating my research somehow by offering my ideas on how to better engage the students? Is it ethical to know teaching

strategies which might benefit the class and *not* share them? I still don't know the "right" answer to those questions. I ultimately replied with my assessment of what I'd observed in that classroom and elsewhere – academic "slippage" during the winter months – and what I thought might work to engage students (e.g., more in-class writing exercises related to the readings). I explained my conflicted position as a researcher who didn't want to unduly manipulate situations I was there to observe but also reiterated my position as an educator interested in seeing programs like Clemente succeed. The professor was grateful for the feedback and appreciated my position, which he compared to a "journalist" covering a story:

Thanks so much for the feedback, that is SO helpful. You are in a unique position insofar as having observed so many Clemente classes, and I do not want to compromise your position, because you are right, you are in the position of a journalist not wanting to impact the story you are covering. Nevertheless, I appreciate the feedback.

In the course of participant observation, I was perhaps most surprised by how genuinely warm and welcoming the students and staff at both sites were, particularly my field site in the northeast. I was included on student and staff emails, invited to all faculty meetings and student trips, and more or less treated like a natural part of the program. Many students invited me to their birthday parties and karaoke, asked to meet for coffee before class, and texted me (and still do) on every major holiday. Though navigating the invisible boundaries between researcher and friend was at times challenging, particularly in the beginning, I was fortunate to have been a part of two course sites that welcomed me and supported this project.

**Semi-Structured In-Depth Interviews.** Combined with participant observation, interviews helped me to understand the meanings that the Clemente experiences held for students. In-depth interviews tend to be relatively long in duration, which allows for extensive exploration of open-ended topics. I focused my questions on students' personal and educational histories; how and why students enrolled in the course; their experiences in the course, with

various subjects, their peers, and instructors; their perceptions of their engagement as democratic citizens; and how experiences in the course shaped parenting practices, among other queries (See Appendices I-O for interview protocols). To further elucidate development or transformation that students may have experienced, I conducted follow-up interviews of the midwest and northeast students. Time constraints of the dissertation-writing process permitted extensive follow-ups, but I felt post-graduation interviews were important because students may be apt to initially report transformation, for example, but may fall into pre-Clemente patterns and behaviors with the passage of time.

To summarize, midwest students were interviewed post-graduation (summer 2015) and one year later (summer 2016). Northeast students were interviewed during the fall of 2015, post-graduation (summer 2016), and about six months later (fall 2016). Midwest and northeast graduates from previous cohorts and students and graduates from other sites were interviewed once, and those interviews began during the fall of 2015 and continued through the summer of 2016. Additionally, I interviewed course directors, instructors, and related staff (such as program administrators and social workers) from the midwest, northeast, and other US course sites (see Table 1). These interviews offered the perspective of non-students who were immersed in the course and who saw the students and their experiences from a different vantage point than the students themselves.

| Table 1<br><i>Data Collection</i> |                       |   |                    |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|---|--------------------|
| <b>MIDWEST COURSE SITE</b>        |                       |   |                    |
| <b>Technique</b>                  | <b>Time Frame</b>     | <b>Population</b>                                   | <b>Interview N</b> |
| Participant observation           | 2014-2015             | Students, families, staff, etc.                     | n/a                |
| Interviews                        | Summer 2015           | Graduates of 2014-2015 cohort                       | <b>5</b>           |
| Interviews (follow-up)            | Summer 2016           | Graduates of 2014-2015 cohort                       | 5                  |
| Interviews                        | Summer 2015           | Course directors, instructors, staff                | <b>10</b>          |
| Interviews                        | Summer 2015           | Drop-outs of 2014-2015 cohort                       | <b>2</b>           |
| Interviews                        | Fall 2015-Spring 2016 | Graduates of previous cohorts                       | <b>5</b>           |
| <b>NORTHEAST COURSE SITE</b>      |                       |   |                    |
| <b>Technique</b>                  | <b>Time Frame</b>     | <b>Population</b>                                   | <b>Interview N</b> |
| Participant observation           | 2015-2016             | Students, families, staff, etc.                     | n/a                |
| Interviews                        | Fall 2015             | Current students of 2015-2016 cohort                | <b>18</b>          |
| Interviews (follow-up)            | Summer 2016           | Graduates of 2015-2016 cohort                       | 17                 |
| Interviews (follow-up)            | Early fall 2017       | Graduates of 2015-2016 cohort                       | 12                 |
| Interviews                        | Fall 2015-Spring 2016 | Drop-outs of 2015-2016 cohort                       | <b>3</b>           |
| Interviews                        | Fall 2015-Spring 2016 | Graduates of previous cohorts                       | <b>6</b>           |
| Interviews                        | Summer 2016           | Course directors, instructors, staff                | <b>6</b>           |
| <b>ADDITIONAL COURSE SITES</b>    |                       |   |                    |
| <b>Technique</b>                  | <b>Time Frame</b>     | <b>Population</b>                                   | <b>Interview N</b> |
| Interviews                        | Fall 2015-Spring 2016 | Current students and graduates of 2002-2016 cohorts | <b>37</b>          |
| Interviews                        | Fall 2015-Spring 2016 | Course directors, instructors, staff                | <b>24</b>          |
|                                   |                       |   | <b>150 total</b>   |

**Informal, Ethnographic Interviews.** Ethnographic interviewing is a specialized form of interviewing meant to elicit “insider” knowledge and gather cultural data (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). Such interviews were ongoing, as there were many opportunities to speak with students and instructors before and after class, during breaks and in-class activities, and at outside events and tutoring sessions. This approach, which I thought of more as “conversations” than interviews per se, was especially useful in eliciting participants’ meanings for events and behaviors in real time (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

**Secondary Data.** I also analyzed publically available secondary data related to Clemente (e.g., course syllabi, websites, newsletters, and Facebook pages). Many of these sources featured student writing, interviews, and profiles as well as staff perspectives on various courses, their content, and events. I explored these secondary data sources in an effort to further triangulate the information I had gathered through participant observation and interviews (Stake, 2006).

### **Data Analysis**

This naturalistic study involves “an inseparable relationship between data collection and data analysis” (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993, p. 114). The processes of data collection and analysis were interactive, which led to adjustments in interview questions and observational strategies as new information emerged. Curry and Wells (2004) offer guidance for researchers, such as myself, who analyze interviews and field notes through a transformative learning lens; they ask, “How has the topic of investigation operated in this person’s experience; what kind of transformation did this person experience; and how did this experience change how this person interacted with their world?” (p. 81). These were especially important questions for me to bear in mind as I analyzed the data.

I used NVivo for data analysis and followed Creswell’s (2007) six steps of data analysis.

That is, I: (1) Organized and prepared the raw data. Digital recordings were transcribed verbatim by a transcription service per IRB specifications regarding confidentiality. To protect each participant's identity and still differentiate between each interview, each participant was assigned a pseudonym and each recording was given a non-identifying numbered descriptor before analysis; (2) Closely reviewed all transcripts, field notes, and memos; (3) "Chunked" the information into meaningful categories in order to allow for the examination and interpretation of the data; (4) Described the physical setting(s), the people involved, the events that took place, and the experience as a whole; (5) Created narration, allowing the researcher to make meaning of the data through the discovery of emergent themes and patterns. Data were synthesized to make it a "real" experience for the reader; and (6) Interpreted and drew conclusions.

Coding is a process for both categorizing qualitative data and for describing the implications and details of these categories. Coding followed the techniques outlined by Strauss and Corbin's (1990) grounded theory for data analysis: open coding, focused or selective coding, and axial coding. Initially, I did open or line-by-line coding, considering the data in detail while developing some preliminary categories. Later, I moved to more selective coding, "the process of selecting the central or core category, systematically relating it to other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development" and coded with respect to core concepts (e.g., students' engagement as citizens and parents, personal transformation, salient aspects of the program, and so on) (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 116). I created selective codes by connecting and consolidating axial codes and abstracting from the evidence contained in the data. Themes became apparent from analysis of interviews and observations and were continually refined until a generalized pattern of the students' experiences was established.

## **Validity**

Although there is no truly neutral research, and critical ethnography suggests we need not apologize for using research to criticize and change the status quo, data credibility checks to protect research against what Barton (2001) terms “our enthusiasms” is essential in creating self-reflexive social science. A potential weakness of all qualitative research is that the researcher can never be absolutely certain that participants’ words and actions have been accurately interpreted. This is because communication is inherently imperfect, but also because I, as the researcher, can never fully escape my own subjectivity and biases. Although I have had the good fortune of being integrated into Clemente as a tutor and had the support of coordinators, instructors, and staff, I can never fully escape my outsider status; there is the very visible difference of my race (white) and social location (doctoral student at the University of Chicago), which invariably send nonverbal messages. As a result, reactivity and researcher bias pose threats to validity. My presence in the classroom may have influenced students’ behavior in some way. I tried to alleviate potential reactivity by explaining my background as a former teacher and current doctoral candidate, my role as a participant observer and tutor, and my sincere interest in students’ experience in the course. When explaining my project and asking for consent, I reiterated that participation was voluntary and all data was confidential and used only to inform my dissertation. Although I got the sense that students grew accustomed to my presence and perceived me as a member of the class to some degree, I remain aware that race, gender, and perceived social location nevertheless act as a “powerful and inescapable influence” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, p. 109).

Researcher bias is an additional threat to validity. As a former educator with far-left political and social beliefs, I am committed to education for education’s sake, not for the sake of

creating a more efficient or specialized workforce, and as a former teacher of low-income, historically marginalized students, I believe in the power of education to foster personal and intellectual growth. To mitigate this potential bias, I reflected on any preconceived ideas and assumptions I might have, as well as any attitudes, feelings, and perceptions that arose during data collection. I also actively sought negative cases. This study was originally designed to examine students and staff in two cohorts of students. However, in an attempt to find negative cases, I deliberately expanded the sample, and made necessary IRB amendments, to include students and staff at course sites across the US, as well as drop outs. On this point, Lather (2003) argues, “It is essential that the research design seek counterpatterns as well as convergences if data are to be credible” (p. 191).

Descriptive validity refers to the accuracy of data reported by the researcher (Johnson, 1997). To strengthen descriptive validity, I employed triangulation, the method of utilizing several data-gathering techniques (e.g., participant observations, ethnographic interviews, in-depth interviews, secondary data analysis) (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Triangulation allows for enriched data, potentially thick descriptions, and the examination of a phenomenon from more than one vantage point. Triangulation of different data sources was employed in the collection and examination of data to “build a coherent justification” for the categories and themes (Creswell, 2003, p. 196). Triangulation, however, does not mean that all data sources necessarily converge to reveal the “truth.” Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) caution that adopting a view that triangulation will produce a more complete picture is naïve. They argue that differences emerging from data are important in that they can improve validity: “What is involved in triangulation is not just a matter of checking whether inferences are valid, but of discovering which inferences are more valid” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 200).

There is a direct link between data triangulation and data saturation; triangulation works to ensure saturation (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Clear guidelines for determining saturation are nearly nonexistent in the qualitative methodology literature (Bowen, 2008). Data saturation entails bringing new participants into a study until the data becomes redundant. In other words, saturation is reached when the researcher gathers data to the point of diminishing returns, when nothing new is being added (Bowen, 2008). There was no magic “*n*” for me to reach for this study. I noticed data beginning to replicate after I had completed students’ first interviews at the northeastern course site, but, rather than assuming I had reached saturation, I expanded the sample in search of negative cases. I did not find any divergent cases, and data moved closer toward redundancy as the number of interviews progressed. I nevertheless interviewed everyone who availed themselves to me through the early summer of 2016. Data saturation is said to be reached when there is enough information to replicate the study (O’Reilly & Parker, 2013; Walker, 2012), when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), and when further coding is no longer feasible (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). I am confident that this study meets these criterion.

Interpretive validity can be obtained to the extent that participants’ thoughts, intentions, and experiences are accurately understood and reported by the researcher. Member checks allow participants to “correct errors of fact or errors of interpretation ... [and] to offer additional information” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 239). Member checks were performed after data analysis. I reviewed my interpretations and tentative conclusions with participants who availed themselves and in the event of a disagreement over interpretation, I asked the participant to clarify their perspective. Reason and Rowan (1981) argue that member checks need to become a standard part of emancipatory research designs: “Good research at the non-alienating end of the

spectrum ... goes back to the subject with the tentative results, and refines them in the light of the subjects' reactions" (p. 248). Indeed, I felt that I had an ethical obligation to return to a subsample of the research participants to elicit their thoughts on my conclusions. In sum, I paid close attention to the credibility of the data and used both constructive (during the process) and evaluative (post hoc) procedures to ensure the trustworthiness of the research and provide quality assurance – that is, I employed triangulation, member checks, and negative case analysis.

### **Managing My Role as Researcher**

The inherent power imbalance between the researcher and the researched, and the ethical concerns related to this imbalance, are often dwelled upon in qualitative research literature. Attention is often paid to the asymmetric roles between the researcher and the researched. However, the literature also stresses that qualitative traditions have "...a common epistemological ground: the researcher determination to minimize the distance and separateness of researcher-participant relationships" (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, & Pessach, 2009, p. 279). Indeed, I worked to minimize the social distance between the students and myself whenever possible.

In many ways, I was *clearly* an outsider. I am an educated, middle-class, white woman studying low-income, adults of color whose educations have been interrupted and who, for the most part, have been unable to fulfill their educational goals. What perhaps was less obvious was that I grew up in rural poverty, come from a family with little formal education, and know all too well how poverty so often derails even the best laid plans. Too, I have only ever worked in the education field, and in poor urban areas, so both field sites were familiar. Despite my familiarity and comfort with my research sites, my outsider status was always present in some form or another. For example, it was made clear when a student, Rick, wanted to walk me to the train

after class because he thought it was dangerous for a white woman to walk alone. He mentioned this in an interview:

I tell you, when I first learned that you were walking ... by yourself, I said, I said to myself, and I even said to my mom, I said, "Mom," I said, "Now Charity, she's just a little lady, this little white lady, walking ... by herself at 9 o'clock at night!" I said, "I can't have her walking down there by herself like that." She said, "You walk with her." I said, "I do, you know, we do." Just that protective part of me just said, "OK, I got to come and step in." And see, that's just the kind of person I am today, but before [prison], was I always like that? No.

Rick, another student named John, and I often walked to the train together, and I used that opportunity to talk with them about the night's class or what they had planned for the week. Indeed, developing rapport was crucial to the success of this project. In the beginning, I gave careful thought to how I could reduce social distance between the participants and myself. I, like most researchers, wanted to be accepted. Rather quickly, I developed friendly relationships with nearly all the students; I made a point of not asking pointed, interview-like questions and simply engaged in small talk with them before and after class. We talked about children and jobs, TV shows and pets; we joked and laughed. With time, students shared more personal information with me, which I think is due largely to the fact that I acted as a nonjudgmental listener. In short, I used that time to get to know the students on a personal level, and by the time I was ready to conduct an interview, a friendly, collegial relationship had already been established between most of us.

My embeddedness with the Clemente classes led me to reflect many times on the relationships between the research participants and myself. There were times that I contemplated the invisible boundaries between the researcher and researched. For example, I once complimented a participant on a necklace she was wearing, and she took it off, pressed it into my hand, and smiled, telling me it was an African tradition to give away the item one is

complimented on. Was it ethical for me to take the necklace? Another participant bought me a coffee from Starbucks and brought it to class as surprise. Was it ethical for me to accept it? During graduation, the students presented me with a plaque and a potted lily, which I knew they had pooled their money together to buy. Was it ethical to accept those items? I thought deeply about instances like these, instances which happened more often than I anticipated. There were other times when boundaries were much clearer. Once, a terminally ill student texted me during a weekend to ask if he could talk with me about “something personal.” I spoke with him and, knowing I was ill-equipped to offer health-related advice, referred him to the course’s social worker. Another time, a student, Tisha, disclosed to me that she had been sexually abused as a child and, knowing I had a social work degree, asked if I could counsel her. Similarly, I told her no, referred her to the appropriate sources, and she subsequently began private therapy. She later mentioned this instance in an interview. The following excerpt demonstrates how we navigated boundaries but also shows that Tisha came to see me as not just a researcher but also a friend:

Tisha: Remember how I wanted you to counsel me and you couldn’t?

Charity: Right.

Tisha: I’m glad you kept it 100% with me as far as like, “Listen. I like what we’re talking about, but I definitely can’t, well, get paid or have you on file as one of my clients because it would kind of interfere with this [research].” You know what I’m saying?

Charity: And you understood that?

Tisha: Yeah, and I respected that because at the end of the day you’re here on a mission, and you wouldn’t want to compromise your mission because of something like that. ... Two mature people would have to be in that situation in order for it to really work because if you and I had fell out because of that, it probably wouldn’t have been a friendship in the first place. You know what I’m saying? So I guess when you have a bridge and one thing falls out of the bridge and the whole bridge goes bad, it means the bridge wasn’t built to last in the first place. So I completely understood.

I realized that maintaining a rigid researcher role would alienate me from the students, and I did not want to experience the depersonalization that can accompany a mechanical approach to qualitative research (Daly, 1997; Oakley, 1981). With time, I was able to define my role as a qualitative researcher as I came to understand the importance of the principles of “fair exchange” and minimizing the power differential with research participants whenever possible (Daly, 1992a; 1992b).

## CHAPTER 4: Humanities

“I didn’t even fully understand ‘humanities,’ what that actually meant before I started. But then understanding it and then just studying it, we studied, like, Shakespeare, Henry David Thoreau, and Gandhi, and, you know, Martin Luther King. We studied and read these things and just read about life, you know, philosophy. It just opens your mind in a different way and opens your eyes. When you study that and when you think about today’s society and what happens in today’s society especially – I always come back to race because for me that’s just what it’s about. I’m a Black man and that’s just, you know, I can’t ever really separate myself from that. So, when I study humanities and see how it opens my eyes, it helps me to see things a lot differently now than I might have before.”

– *Cody, 2006 graduate, African American, age 38*

“Clemente will forever be in my heart. It’s propelled me to go forward. I was at the point where, ‘Oh, I’m just not going to bother [with education] anymore.’ But Clemente showed me there is so much more out there. It taught me a different way of thinking. It challenged me, encouraged me, enlightened me. ... If I could do my bachelor’s and master’s there, I would.”

– *Adelaide, 2016 graduate, West Indian, age 55*

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While the content of a Clemente course is comparable to most any college-level humanities survey class, for most of Clemente’s students, like Cody and Adelaide, the content is unfamiliar and a world away from the job training programs and basic education courses to which they’ve grown accustomed (Cunningham, 1993; Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011). Over the course of two academic years, I sat in Clemente classrooms and witnessed students’ often infectious enthusiasm for the humanities, and spoke to graduates, some of whom were a decade or more post-Clemente, who routinely and wholeheartedly praised the course. Through class nights and conversations, I couldn’t help but wonder, “What’s so special about the humanities? Would I see and hear this same enthusiasm if it had been, say, a biology class?” Though I’m unlikely to ever know the answer to the latter, I did ask students, graduates, and staff the former. This chapter focuses first and foremost on Clemente students, who they are and what drew them to the course, but it also examines the program’s curriculum and students’ reactions to a humanities education firmly rooted in the Western canon.

## Who Are Clemente Students?

Clemente students are all adult learners and most are considered “non-traditional,” an imprecise term used to describe a large, heterogeneous population of adult learners whose myriad life circumstances can interfere with their ability to access and persist in postsecondary education. While definitions vary, the NCES (2015) defines non-traditional students as meeting one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment in postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full-time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or does not have a high school diploma. Most Clemente students meet several of those characteristics. Within the non-traditional cohort, of course, is a large number of adult students – a pool often defined as 25 or older – and that represents the vast majority of Clemente students.

For many of the students in the sample, the course represents the first positive educational experience they’d ever had, while others recounted enjoying school, particularly reading, as a child but were derailed along the way. Cross (1981) emphasized that students’ difficulty starting or finishing education increases with the number of barriers they experience, a finding also supported by Bowl (2001): “University entry is experienced as a dislocation and disjunction which is intensified if the learner is ‘non-traditional’ in more than one sense. . . . Financial, institutional and class-based barriers impede the progress of non-traditional students” (p. 157). The educational trajectories of nearly all Clemente students in the programs I studied were interrupted at some point by various life circumstances: physical and mental illness; familial obligations, most often caring for a sick or elderly family member; pregnancy and subsequent childrearing; substance abuse; incarceration; educational debt and transcript holds<sup>1</sup>;

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<sup>1</sup> See Griffith (2016) for commentary on low-income students and transcript holds.

poverty; indecision; and academic failure. Numerous Clemente students recounted how they had enrolled in vocational courses, community colleges, and, in rarer cases, four-year universities, only to drop out and then enroll later somewhere elsewhere in another program entirely. This pattern is exemplified by Ann-Marie, a 2016 course graduate and mother of five in her early 40s, whose educational history was marked by interruption, uncertainty about what field to pursue, familial obligations, and an inadequate support system:

I don't remember what year I graduated high school, but I graduated and then that's when I went straight into the secretarial arts course. It was more like a trade school. It was a two-year degree. I didn't finish there, and then I went on to the City Community College [for early childhood education], I don't remember how much. I think I had one semester left to complete. I just never went back, and I didn't want to do early childhood education anymore. That was also a two-year degree. That was me trying to better myself, but the pressure of the family, going to school. Well, I didn't have a support system seriously, and the only support that I had was the counselor at the school for guidance. He did as much as he could but, apart from that, I just fell apart. I couldn't handle it. It was *hard*.

Rick, a 2016 graduate who spent 25 years in prison immediately prior to enrolling in Clemente, recalled an unstable childhood in group homes and special education classes and an educational path that was ultimately interrupted by incarceration:

I got my GED, and prior to that, my educational background was I completed the eighth grade, maybe. Most of my education was self-taught, you know? I acquired a lot of education, I guess street education. But from an academic standpoint, I was just picking things up as I went along. Inside the penitentiary, I went in in 1996. In 1995, they took the college programs out. So, even though I already had a GED, I couldn't take any college courses unless I was paying for it. I was always told I was a good kid in class. I never really saw that, but I was always told I was smart. I needed attention. ... Most of the time I always remember being, I was never in mainstream classes. I was always in Special Ed. I grew up from group homes to group homes, so of course there was some behavioral issues that I was dealing with. So, class was, I know I didn't really take it seriously. I never really took it seriously, especially when it makes you feel a certain kind of way – you're deemed different and looked at different. ... I don't think I finished [eighth grade] because I got in trouble. I ended up going to a [juvenile correctional] facility, and then from there I just never stepped foot in a classroom again.

Clemente was the first educational experience he'd had since eighth grade – over 30 years.

The inability to qualify for and later pay back loans also contributed to many students'

unfulfilled educational goals. Darnell, a 44-year old student in 2014 who ultimately did not complete the course due to work conflicts, explained that he couldn't enroll in trade school decades prior because "my loan was denied because I didn't sign up for the Selective Service when I turned 18." Similarly, Cheryl, a 50-year old Clemente student, explained that she couldn't qualify for financial aid until a loan she had taken out years earlier was out of default: "I was 19 years old then and didn't know anything about college. That \$2,000 loan has turned into an \$8,000 loan, and I wanna go to school *so bad* right now." Finally, Melissa, a 2015 graduate in her early thirties, followed a more traditional path when she enrolled in college directly after high school, but her plans were derailed by a lack of understanding of how financial aid worked and, later, by pregnancy:

I went to vocational high school, got my diploma. From there, I tried to go to college, but no one in my family had gone to college. I had one uncle who was doing, like, one night class at a time. So, I took out a small loan, registered, paid tuition for the first semester, paid for my fees, paid for my books, and then I ran out of money. So, by the time I got to the second semester, I couldn't register because I couldn't afford it. I didn't know I was supposed to go take out another loan, so I couldn't even take my finals because I hadn't registered for the second semester. So, I basically wasted, you know, like \$4,000. ... Probably about six or seven years later, I tried to go back to community college. I enrolled in two courses. I finished one, started the next one, got pregnant, stopped going, dropped out. So, I got credits for the first course, but I got a failure for the second because I didn't unenroll the right way. Then I took a non-credit course, it was pretty rigorous. .... but I didn't get any degree credit for it.

Since graduating from Clemente, though, she enrolled in a non-traditional college program where she is studying for a bachelor's degree in organizational leadership.

While the educational paths of most Clemente students were interrupted or postponed at some point, there is no one "type" of Clemente student. By default, they're low-income, though some Clemente-inspired courses do not verify incomes. Nationally, Clemente students are mostly racial minority women with an average age of about 40 and the vast majority of students fall under the "non-traditional" heading, but any given Clemente classroom hosts a range of ages,

races and ethnicities, abilities, educational histories, and motivations. Natasha, a 2016 Clemente graduate in her early 20s, learned about Clemente from her mother who had graduated from the course the year prior. Natasha somewhat jokingly described her mother as a “helicopter parent” who “pressured” her daughter to enroll. “I decided to sign up purely because I felt pressured by my mom,” she said. “There’s really no other reason.” When I interviewed Natasha, she explained that she entered the course with a “prejudiced” idea of whom her classmates would be:

I mean, truthfully, I had this kind of negative outlook on it [Clemente] at first and was like, I’m gonna see a bunch of, like, outcasts who’re coming together. You know, it’s so bad to think that way, but I was like this is a bunch of random people, drug addicts, and whatever who didn’t do anything in life. Just crazy people who’re just like, “Oh, I found a free program! I get a free bus pass, and I just learn something,” you know? ... But it ends up being so much more than that. ... I feel like everyone kind of has their own story, so you can’t really look at people and just be like, “Oh, you know, you’re this, you’re that.”

Natasha entered the course assuming that it attracted “outcasts,” which may, in fact, be true to some degree, as Clemente students have often been pushed out of or excluded from a variety of institutions, but her conclusion that “everyone ... has their own story” is perhaps a more apt description of Clemente’s students and underscores the range of individuals in any given classroom.

### **Humanities – Does It Matter to Students?**

The public discourse around the humanities has tended to focus on its alleged state of “crisis” – that is, a decline in interest and productivity. According to the Humanities Indicators, a project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences that provides information on the state of the humanities, the number and shares of students earning humanities degrees at the bachelor’s and master’s levels has decreased over time, reinforcing the narrative of decline (American Academy, 2016). While it is true that the number of students majoring in the humanities in the US is down from its peak in the 1960s, the “crucial drop” occurred in the 1970s and early 1980s,

not in the last decade, and that drop was from an unprecedented historical high. Since then, enrollments have been fundamentally stable (Meranze, 2015). Despite this relative stability, American colleges and universities have closed and revamped humanities departments and cut faculty positions for the past several years, propelled by politicians who question humanities programs on the grounds that they're impractical. To illustrate this point, commentary from politicians on the issue of humanities' utility has included:

“Welders make more money than philosophers. We need more welders than philosophers.” – Florida Senator Marco Rubio

“If I'm going to take money from a citizen to put into education then I'm going to take that money to create jobs. So, I want that money to go to degrees where people can get jobs in this state. Is it a vital interest of the state to have more anthropologists? I don't think so.” – Florida Governor Rick Scott

“If you want to take gender studies that's fine, go to a private school and take it. But I don't want to subsidize that if that's not going to get someone a job.” – former North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory

“As an English major your options are, uh, you better go to graduate school, all right? And find a job from there.” – former Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney

“I promise you, folks can make a lot more, potentially, with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.” – President Barack Obama (Jaschik, 2014)

While the health, future, and utility of the humanities have been a topic of conversation for some time in higher education and political circles, Clemente students are largely unaware of the discourse. Most students enter the course with little to no understanding of what the term “humanities” means and learn of the course through word of mouth or by reading a flyer or poster at a social service agency or library. When I asked students what they thought when they first saw or heard the term “humanities,” respondents typically fell into one of three camps. In the first camp were those who didn't know what the “humanities” entailed and were not attracted to the course because of its content:

Tim: At that time, no, I didn't know what it meant, absolutely not. ... I was confused, because at first, you know, I'm like, "OK, so what is *humanities*?"

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Ann-Marie: I didn't have a clue, and it didn't matter.

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Alejandra: I, honestly, back then, didn't know what that [humanities] meant. The only thing that made sense to me, that attracted me to the program, was the college credits and the supports that I would be getting to finish the courses and that's pretty much it.

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Rick: No, it didn't mean anything to me. I don't really think I even looked at that word from a college perspective. I always looked at it for what it was, you know, humanities, you know, people. ... It didn't matter if it was humanities ... or anything else for that matter. It didn't matter! It was just about being in the circle of these higher minds. For me, that's all that really mattered.

The second camp consisted of those who were unsure but could make an educated guess as to what "humanities" meant, and were sufficiently intrigued:

Inez: No, it didn't [matter], to be honest with you. ... Like, I would imagine if I had to take a wild guess at it that it meant dealing with human issues. Yeah, just the word itself, I just thought it's got to be something awesome because it's going to reveal the inner parts of us.

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Tameka: It made me curious. It made me very curious. I went to find out what it [humanities] was about and why do they call it that. That was one of the first classes, the orientation class was totally awesome because they cleared everything up for me, and it made me want to come back. It made me want to come back.

And in the third camp were a minority of students who were familiar with the humanities based on some prior experience, whether self-education or high school or college-level courses, and were attracted to the course precisely because of its content:

Chadwick: Well, it was great because I actually had took Humanities 101 back in the early '80s. ... I didn't get a whole lot out of it, but I liked learning about art and I could tell it was, how you could put it, kind of a worldly craft, a worldly opportunity for me.

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Janelle: All the components of a humanities program are the things that I was interested in. I mean, my major initially was British literature. I've done a semester in Cambridge, England. I've always been interested in literature and just world history, that sort of thing, so it just felt right.

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Carla: It was so attractive to me. I mean it was one of my favorite things in school. I had a humanities class in high school that I loved. Everything that's a part of it – all the different categories – are so interesting to me. It's just like an indulgence, a thing that I would be lucky to get to do. So, yeah, it really appealed to me.

While a minority of students were attracted to Clemente because it was a humanities course, most applied for different reasons. When I asked students and graduates why they decided to apply, they routinely talked about being in a “transition” period, a point in their lives where they wanted to “better” themselves and/or the lives of their children. Debbie, a 2005 graduate, said that she applied because “I was in a dead-end job and going through a lot of things in my life. So, I figured that it would be a breath of fresh air, you know, a *change*.” Ann-Marie, the recent graduate referenced earlier, was similar to Debbie in that she wanted to change the direction of her life. I should note here that interviewees often became emotional during our conversations, recounting mistakes they'd made, plans that had gone awry and, sometimes, significant trauma that had disrupted their lives. Ann-Marie was one such interviewee, and she grew emotional as she described why she felt compelled to apply to Clemente:

Ann-Marie: Basically, I'm on a journey of rediscovering myself because I believe over the years I have redesigned my life to accommodate my family. I had twins when I was young. I fell in love and I had my children, you know, young. I had to put certain things on the back burner to make sure that

they were OK. So, oh gosh, I'm getting a little emotional here. [crying, pause]

Charity: It's OK.

Ann-Marie: Yes, so I had to redesign me to fit my family, to accommodate my family. Now I'm actually on a journey of rediscovering *Ann-Marie* and doing those things that *Ann-Marie* like to do.

Others applied because they wanted to do something "productive" with their time. Luisa, a 68-year old 2016 graduate, said she felt like she needed to do something "constructive and useful. I wanted to exercise my mind because I'm getting up in age. I do the same thing on a regular basis. I go to work, I come home, go to work, come home. I needed to do something besides that." This sentiment was echoed by many other senior students, as well as by immigrants without legal authorization to work in the US. As one recent immigrant from South America told me, "It's just something for me to do because at the moment I'm not working and I'm not in school. I just needed something to do to pass my time, and I decided, you know, if it's feasible, I can do it. It occupies my time, it gives me something else to do, and at the same time I can earn some credits."

Many students expressed that they had long wanted to pursue traditional college education but chose not to because of the cost, time commitment, and/or their perceived incompetence. Many students and graduates recalled both being labeled by others and thinking of themselves as "stupid," "dumb," and, as one student put it, "point-blank, just not smart," prior to the Clemente experience. Carol, a 66-year old African American woman and a 2006 graduate, spoke movingly about having been told decades prior that she wasn't "college material," words that she carried with her throughout her life as she navigated motherhood, addiction, and homelessness. Carol learned of Clemente through a flyer at her local library:

I had a counselor in high school that told me that I wasn't college material, and that

always had bothered me. Yeah, so, I always had an aching inside of my heart to go to school. When I seen that [advertisement for the Clemente course], it was like a light bulb, and then things went off and I was like, “Yes, I *am* college material.” I was a little afraid, but, you know, I was going to sink, swim, or dog paddle til I got there!

Others, particularly women, anticipated Clemente being an “emotionally safe” place to continue their education. Khadijah, a 2015 graduate in her forties, told me that because she didn’t graduate high school and was insecure about her writing ability, it was important that she be surrounded by “supportive” classmates and instructors. “I wanted to go back to school and be around people who were like me and supportive,” she said. “I remember looking at the picture [on the Clemente course flyer], and there was so many women of color that looked like my age mates, and I was just like, ‘Wow.’” Seeing the Clemente flyer was instrumental in Carol and Khadijah applying to the course, though for different reasons. For Carol, it reminded her of her desire to further her education and stopped her negative self-talk. For Khadijah, the flyer depicted women who looked like her and would likely be supportive of her as a classmate.

An often-repeated reason for applying was also perhaps the simplest: students said they applied simply because they wanted to *complete* something. With lives marked by numerous false starts and premature stops, seeing the course through from start to finish was an important goal for many students, and they expressed this sentiment with surprisingly high frequency:

Jimena: I wanted to get into something and complete it.

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Adelaide: I really want to finish. I just want to finish.

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Luisa: If I start something, I would like to finish it. Whether the finished part is going to be what I expected it to be or not, I’ll never know unless I finish. So, that’s part of the reason why I applied. I want to finish the course, you know, unless something happens that actually really can keep me from continuing to go on, I plan to finish.

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Rick: So, that's what I'm looking to get from this, if nothing else, just to be able to start something and finish it.

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Al: First and foremost, I want to graduate with flying colors. I really want to complete this, I want to.

## **The Curriculum**

So, what, exactly, are students so determined to finish? An analysis of syllabi from Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses across the US, as well as discussions with course directors, faculty, and graduates, reveal a broad range of material covered, with Bard-affiliated Clemente courses covering the most seemingly traditional humanities texts. Though Bard approves syllabi for its courses, there is no uniform curriculum, and there is considerable debate among course directors and faculty as to what should be taught and *how* it should be taught.

Clemente students study a variety of texts, and syllabi differ by course site. By way of example, in a literature class, students might study Baldwin's *Sonny's Blues*, Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, Dante's *Inferno*, Dickens's *Great Expectations*, Homer's *The Odyssey*, Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and Voltaire's *Candide*. Students might read shorter works like plays, poems, and short stories in their entirety and read excerpts of longer works like, say, *The Odyssey*. Students working to receive credit might be asked to write two formal papers (e.g., a response paper and a more analytic paper) as well as complete in-class exercises.

Philosophy curriculum could cover Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aurelius' *Meditations*, Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality*, De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, Epictetus' *Handbook*, Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Kant's

*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, King's *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, Marx and Engel's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and Plato's *Republic*. Students might be asked to write a paper about various' philosophers' ideas about how one should live.

US history might begin with an exploration of what history actually is and then move through conquests, the making of colonial America, the American Revolution, slavery, westward expansion, immigration, the Depression and New Deal, World War II, civil rights, and current issues. Students might be assigned a book like Zinn's *A People's History of the United States* but would also be assigned a range of primary source documents like, for example, Columbus' letter to Queen Isabella, the *Declaration of Independence*, Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and the Plessy v. Ferguson case brief.

Art history is typically a survey and covers ancient Egyptian, Greek, Romanesque, and Gothic art and architecture; the Italian Renaissance; some African art; nineteenth and twentieth century art, photography, and architecture; and contemporary art and architecture. Students might be asked to write weekly journals related to formal analysis as well as a final paper. Some sites use classic art historical text books, like Gardner's *Art Through the Ages*, while I've seen others rely entirely on PowerPoints and handouts.

Critical Thinking and Writing often provides its own readings such as Audre Lorde's *The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action*, David Foster Wallace's commencement address, "This is Water," and *New York Times* editorials. Students might explore different forms of writing such as articles and editorials, letters to the editor, research papers, and fiction as well as explore the nuts and bolts of writing an academic paper for class (i.e., brainstorming, outlining, crafting a thesis, supporting one's ideas, and avoiding plagiarism). Class might also include presentations of students' writing assignments as well as writing workshops.

Each year, Bard College hosts Clemente and Clemente-inspired course directors (and a few faculty and individuals interested in starting courses) from across the US and Canada for a weekend to discuss their courses, including best practices, challenges, and so on. My field notes from an annual meeting reveal the discussion that often takes place among the directors about the canon and its place in Clemente courses:

Suzanne, a long-time academic director, makes the statement that “pairing [canonical] texts with non-traditional texts is fantastic.” Robert, who’s also a long-time director and who’s been doodling in his notebook all morning, looks up and agrees. “I choose non-Western texts to go with canonical texts, like *Oedipus*,” he says. Valerie, who is one of the few women of color in the room and with a shorter Clemente history than many others, says, “We need to step back and look at our biases as academics: How much have we inherited what we think is important? Why is it we privilege certain knowledge over others? It’s a dangerous line to say [to students], ‘This is what you have to know.’ At our site, we’re intentional about questioning the canon. ... I’d love to teach Clemente completely outside the canon, but I can’t.” What she means is that her course would lose its university affiliation, and thus its ability to award students college credit, if she were to abandon the Western canon entirely.

Robert has stopped drawing but still holds his pen in his hand, and it punctuates each word he says, “The end in mind isn’t that they’ll be fluent in the Western texts but that they’ll be able to question *power*.”

Annie, a director of a course that is not affiliated with Bard, joins in: “I’ve seen people fall in love with *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, and St. Augustine. I question the canon and I wish we had more time to question the canon, but I see what it gives students.”

Suzanne, who earlier made the statement that pairing canonical and noncanonical texts is “fantastic,” agrees: “Students feel a *pride* in knowing these works. ... They say, ‘I know what people at Bard know.’”

Valerie is still trying to get her point across, “But perhaps there is knowledge from *other* cultures where students can still think critically, ask questions, where students can see themselves.” There’s nodding and agreement, then a pause.

“This makes me think of Descartes’ *Meditations*,” Annie says. “One of our students was in an abusive relationship, and she just kept saying to herself, over and over again, ‘I am a thinking being. I am a thinking being.’ And it gave her the courage to leave. Some texts that we see as outdated can impact them in ways we wouldn’t guess.”

One of the pedagogical concerns of anti-canonism is marginalized students’ understanding of themselves (Casement, 1996). According to this position, students from marginalized groups should be given the opportunity to develop self-awareness and personal identity, which means confronting their oppressed status and working through it. When they’re immersed in the

Western canon, however, marginalized students are not only “denied exposure to political diversity ... but they are denied an opportunity to find their true identities” (Casement, 1996, p. 55). Anti-canonists argue that students from marginalized groups need a curriculum that emphasizes “countercultural, that is, countercanonical, works on race, gender, and class” (Casement, 1996, p. 55). Reform canonism rejects anti-canon extremes but suggests that works by women, racial minorities, and other historically marginalized groups should be subject to possible inclusion (Casement, 1996). Most Clemente faculty and course directors seemed to embrace a sort of revised version of the canon, teaching classical Western texts as well as some works from other traditions and cultures, but those with Bard-affiliated courses frequently emphasized the importance of teaching a core group of canonical texts.

As one long-time director told me:

Everybody should read the Allegory of the Cave. I think they need to read some Shakespeare, *Antigone*, the *Declaration of Independence*, *Letter from Birmingham Jail*, you know? Those are the kinds of things that I think should be part of any Clemente course. But ... I don't teach the dead white guys to deconstruct them, either. I mean, that can be part of it, but I just think it's important for all of those [students] to understand where these ideas came from. ... I think it's a great thing to debate and I think we [Clemente] should keep having it, and I think that we will always insist that some examples of the canon are taught. ... I understand the concern, but I kind of see it as *both-and*, not *either-or*.

Similarly, a literature professor who'd been teaching in Clemente for just a few years explained that he was still wrestling with what to teach each year. He began by teaching texts exclusively from the Western canon but, for the second year, amended his syllabus to include more Black writers. A graduate of that second year, however, approached the professor when she learned that the previous class had read *The Odyssey* – perhaps no better example of a canonical text – but her class, with a reading list geared toward writers of the Harlem Renaissance, had not. In the two years since, the professor has tried to strike more of a balance between the “classics” and

noncanonical works:

The first year, I was a strict purist. I wanted to teach classes that covered Dante and Shakespeare ... and I veered away [the next year]. ... They [students] were mostly African American, so the curriculum was top-heavy with African American readings. Essie [Bridge student] heard this class [first year] was reading *The Odyssey* and asked, ‘How come we didn’t get to read that?’ This year, I did a mix of classics and others I thought the students would embrace. There are certain things you don’t want to leave out. They should read something from Ancient Greece, like *The Odyssey* or *Oedipus*, some of Dante’s cantos, something from Shakespeare. It’s called the Clemente Course in the *Humanities*, so we definitely need to teach *humanities* texts, but also some contemporary stuff. I tried to blend some classics and some stuff they’d engage with.

The question of what to teach Clemente’s historically marginalized students was also raised by Manuel, an executive director of an organization responsible for financial and administrative support for its state’s Clemente courses. He explained that when the organization started their courses well over a decade ago, they “bought into Earl Shorris’ notion of studying the classics” but, fairly quickly, found “lots of political landmines there.” Manuel recalled:

At one point I remember when we just started the course I went to meet with folks at a local university, and they were not interested *at all* because they didn’t like the inclusion of the classics. They very much believed that people should be reading contemporary literature because contemporary literature had more diversity in terms of representation than Shakespeare or a Greek tragedy. So, that’s been the sort of political conversations that have happened ever since our course started. ... In fact, one of the conversations we had recently was do we want to continue to be so stringent about the literature class always starting with the Greeks and then doing Shakespeare? Do we want the philosophy class to always start with Plato? ... The staff at our organization, their instinct is really to go to the community and partner with them from day one and ask, “What is it that you want?” and ask them to help shape whatever it is that we create. The question of how you go about doing that with the Clemente course was the one that I raised ... because people are sort of relying on us to expose them to work that they don’t know exists yet.

Though Manuel and his staff had thought of asking alumni about their perspectives on the curriculum, he acknowledged that they “still haven’t done that yet.” Rachel, a new Clemente staff member who was not an instructor, expressed sentiments more extreme than Manuel. She felt conflicted working with Clemente because she ascribed to a “very anti-colonial platform – *very*.” From her perspective, Clemente seems to convey “like, ‘Oh yeah, here’s this canon that

we think is really great and important' ... even saying, 'Oh, we need to give people the tools, the language to be able to interact in these circles,'" she said. "But are we just *perpetuating* this, like, *oppressive* thing? Are we just totally repeating the cycle of 'This is what's good and important and right?' ... Even the idea that any population you are serving, just asking them what they want out of it, I don't see that a lot."

One relatively new course director, however, spoke about plans to implement an alumni group dedicated to exploring the course's content:

One of the things we are trying to work towards is, like, having an Alumni Advisory Council who really help shape what the program is doing. I mean, a lot of our students want to read Plato and that's fine. I don't think that's a problem. There are also a lot of our students who have never read anything by a person who's of the same race as them and want to. So, I think the Advisory Council is going to be really helpful in just, like, letting them know, these are the parameters that we have to work within, so now what can you do within this and what are your suggestions?

The Advisory Council aimed to work from the bottom up, as Rachel and Manuel's staff suggested, though the Council is so new it is difficult to speculate what impact it may have on the course and its curriculum.

Clemente takes an undeniably top-down approach to syllabi construction, as most university courses do. Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire saw society controlled by a dominant elite which foists its culture and values on the masses. In schooling, the elite's standard is conveyed through syllabi, mandated textbooks, tracking, and standardized tests: "Any educational practice based on standardization, on what is laid down in advance, on routines in which everything is predetermined, is bureaucratizing and anti-democratic" (Freire & Faundez, 1989, p. 41). For Freire, curriculum controlled from above imposes dominant culture on students. Traditional education invents its themes, language, and materials from the top-down rather than from the bottom-up, just as Rachel argued.

Ira Shor (1993) argues that in curriculum, “culture is defined scholastically as the Great Books, or as a Great Tradition of literature, music, painting, etc., or as the correct usage of the upper classes, or as the information and experience familiar to the elite” (p. 31). But this culture and language, Shor says, are “alien” to the lives of most students (p. 31). Indeed, many Clemente students remarked that taking the course was “like learning a new language” and how, for example, reading Shakespeare for the first time “was like reading Chinese.” Shor (1993) contends that “students become dependent on the teacher as a delivery system for words, skills, and ideas, to teach them how to speak, think, and act like the dominant elite, whose ways of doing these things are the only ones acceptable” (p. 31). These arguments by Freire and Shor are true to some degree; students have no real say in Clemente’s curriculum and the “words, skills, and ideas” they’re taught *are* very much the product of the dominant elite. But, as literary and social critic Irving Howe (1991) argues, “All education entails the ‘imposing of values’ ... It is not clear how the human race could survive if there were not some ‘imposition’ from one generation to the next” (n.p.).

I was curious how students and graduates felt about the range of material covered. Did it seem diverse to them? Did they feel that they saw themselves in the material? Did any of the concerns raised by faculty and course directors matter to them? Did students feel imposed upon? Is the canon necessarily less liberating than the more diverse curricula? After all, questions about the canon have plagued the humanities for decades. During the “culture wars” of 1980s and 1990s, prominent conservatives held a traditionalist vision of the humanities. For instance, William Bennett, who served in the Reagan administration as chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities and then as Secretary of Education, argued that the Western canon, what he defined as “the best that has been said, thought, written, and otherwise expressed about the

human experience,” should be the foundation of American postsecondary education (Poirier, 1987, n. p.). “Because our society is the product and we the inheritors of Western civilization,” Bennett (1984) claimed, “American students need an understanding of its origins and development, from its roots in antiquity to the present” (p. 9). He continued: “The core of the American college curriculum should be the civilization of the West” (p. 30).

Others took a more critical stance toward the canon, which they saw as Eurocentric and male-dominated. In 1986, Stanford students, led by the president of the Black Student Union, formally complained that the core reading list was structured around “an outdated philosophy of the West being Greece, Europe, and Euro-America,” which was “wrong” and hurtful to students “mentally and emotionally in ways that are not even recognized” (Hartman, 2015, p. 228). Stanford’s academic senate approved small changes to the curriculum, but the media portrayed the revisions as an end to the Western canon. *Newsweek* ran a story titled “Say Goodbye Socrates.” University of Chicago philosopher Allan Bloom (1987), whose book *The Closing of the American Mind* made a case for a humanities education firmly rooted in the Western canon, argued that the Stanford revisions were a travesty: “This total surrender to the present and abandonment of the quest for standards with which to judge it are the very definition of the closing of the American mind” (p. 229). Bloom’s argument however, was not met with sympathy from liberals, as he dismissed works by women, racial minorities, and non-Westerners as lacking merit (Hartman, 2015).

Any controversy related to curriculum and the canon debate seemed lost on Clemente students and graduates I studied. In interviews, students and graduates never used the term “canon” and, with very few exceptions, praised the diversity of the material covered in the course. Obviously, it was more difficult for graduates to recall the content of a course they’d

taken years ago, though their recollections were that the curriculum covered a diverse array of authors, philosophers, and artists. Students and more recent graduates were able to provide more detailed responses about the course content. Students' feelings could, typically, be categorized in one of three ways: In the first group were those who argued that the course covered a sufficiently diverse range of authors, artists, and philosophers, but it was the content, not the race, ethnicity, gender, or background of its creator that mattered:

Al: I thought it was diverse. We covered, God, what's the guy from Spain?

Charity: Yeah, Cervantes?

Al: Right, yeah. He's Spanish. They [Clemente instructors] covered Malcolm X, we covered Martin Luther King, and we covered Charles Dickens. You've got the rainbow of ethnicities right there! I never saw, I never felt like we were too heavy to one ethnicity or the other. ... My thing is all about the story and the content, and I could care less about who wrote it. It was all about what are we studying, why are we studying it, and how is it going to inspire me – that was my perspective on the whole thing.

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Tisha: Looking at the material, I feel like it doesn't matter who wrote it. I'm going to read it if I'm understanding it and I'm intrigued by it. I think what's chosen [by the professors] or what's best represented by that subject is not because something was written by Plato, it's what's *instilled* in it, and it really gives the nitty gritty of philosophy. I kind of feel like that's what speaks more to me than Black, white, male, female. ... I don't think a person's gonna slow down and say, "Wait, this is written by someone *Black*." ... It doesn't matter to me. I kind of feel the subjects that were being covered [in Clemente], it's best that the people [teachers] who presented this material, they presented it in a way where people can understand what happened, why it happened, and why it's relevant today.

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Duke: I feel that enough was brought in so that I didn't feel that any one group was being excluded or slighted. ... I think that what the class was for was to get people up to speed on what has gone on, what has passed, what has happened in the past, how it relates to what's happening now, and how that might affect the future. ... There's no way you can bring everything in. But what the class did for me in particular was it made me kind of

hungry for more, so I'm looking for other people to read. If a class can do just that for someone, then it would've had the desired effect.

A long-time Clemente literature professor echoed these students' sentiments when she explained that she felt strongly that "what makes something good to read or productive of conversation or significant is not because it's considered a great work of literature."

What she found teaching Clemente students for nine years meshed with what I had seen in the classroom and heard in interviews: "What's interesting," she said, "is that in the Clemente classroom, students ... are just not interested in those distinctions." Among the vast majority of students I observed and interviewed, the canon vs. anti-canon debate wasn't of particular interest. Students weren't necessarily interested in whether a work was considered "great" or not but, rather, were interested in works that somehow spoke to them, that they found challenging, entertaining, or that piqued their curiosity. The distinction of whether a work was a classic, or by a Black writer or by a woman, for example, wasn't as important to students as the content itself.

In the second group were students who were under the impression that the Clemente course was designed to mirror the college experience, and they believed that the material that was presented to them was what would also be presented to an undergraduate. This was a point that many students took pride in – that they were taking a *college* course – and their responses indicated that because the subject matter was, presumably, also taught to traditional college students that it was appropriate and valid:

Rick: I saw it as: This is college and this is what college teaches. This is what college is, these are the curriculum that college in general teaches. ... As long as the person [student] comes to it with an open mind and don't come into it with, "See, they're talking about a bunch of dead white men." No. You gotta look at it from a perspective that you perhaps had no idea about, you know, who Socrates was or is or who Plato was or who is Kant. You can't come into it saying, "I want to listen about, I want to hear about Harriet Tubman and Martin Luther King." No. If you're coming into it with that mindset, then you're not going to appreciate it.

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Luciana: You know, the thing is that a friend of mine who's an Ivy League graduate, she kind of told me the concept of Clemente and that it was to give us the opportunity to learn the things that they're teaching at the universities around the country. And so now what I heard is that they're trying to see if they can teach this to pretty much anyone, especially low-income people that don't have access to this type of education. So to say, "Now we should assign African American philosophy," blah, blah, whatever it is, that kind of takes away from what you're trying to teach and expose us to, you know what I mean? So, I feel like if it's designed to give us the same education that a university student is getting, then the material was appropriate. If we're going to learn about something else, then it wouldn't be the same education as in the universities, do you understand what I mean?

Charity: Yep, mm-hmm.

Luciana: So, at the end of the day, if people feel like we need a more diverse curriculum then we need to develop another program. For this program, the curriculum is appropriate. What I know humanities to be is the study of philosophy and all of that. I did feel like this was it, this is what I came to learn. ... But this is what philosophy has always been, so why would we change it? ... We came to learn philosophy and that's what they taught us. Philosophy is all of these, you know, white, old men, you know what I mean?

Charity: Yeah.

Luciana: I don't know, are there any Black authors that are philosophers, or African American or, you know what I mean, other races?

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Roger: Well, I think it was very diverse. ... I mean, you can be offended because it's not about African Americans, Hispanics or Latinos, whatever nationality you are, but the fact is these were the people [whites] who started to create the world and how it looked next. It's just what it is. There have been people who've come along between them that also have made some changes to it, but for the most part it started a certain way. ... I had no issue with any of the information in the stuff that they were giving us. It was fun for me. ... It usually is those people who don't participate in it [Clemente] ... that have an opinion about it. ... They're sitting back just critiquing and they don't understand the dynamics of the individuals who are actually sitting in the classrooms.

Their responses, in different ways, bring up the issue of race. Each of the respondents is a racial minority; Rick and Roger are African American and Luciana is Latina, and each pushed their own racial identity to the background when talking about the content of the course. Rick argues that Black students shouldn't enter Clemente aiming to learn about Black history, for example, and Roger seems to say, albeit erroneously, that the reason why there were fewer African Americans and Latinos in the curriculum was not because of choices made by the professors, but because non-whites simply played a lesser role in world history. And Luciana, after explaining that she understood philosophy to actually *be* "white, old men," ends her response by asking me if there are, in fact, any African American philosophers. These responses show disenfranchised adults who have been socialized to believe that white scholarship *should* be more prominent in syllabi and that racial minority students should not necessarily expect to see themselves in humanities curricula. Two of the three respondents had taken some community college courses years prior to Clemente, but otherwise the respondents had no frame of reference as to what might be taught in college. It is also possible that respondents were hesitant to criticize the curriculum because I, the person asking the questions, am white. I was aware of this possibility in raising the question and, in addition to assuring them that the interview was confidential, I pushed and probed interviewees to explicate and develop their responses.

There were just two exceptions, and they came from two Black women in their early twenties, who were also sisters. Both graduated from Clemente in 2016 and had some college education. One was simultaneously taking the Clemente course and attending community college and the other was taking a semester off from a local four-year college:

Maya: Once again, back to the fact that I'm in college now. I'm taking a Contemporary Black Writers course. So, for me, I felt like I had a balance. But I can totally understand how if I was solely gaining knowledge from Clemente, I would've felt like, "Oh my gosh, where is some, you know, Alice Walker or Toni Morrison or Langston Hughes?" Like, I probably would have felt that way.

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Natasha: Well, I know we had some Malcolm X for a little bit and we also were talking about Baldwin, *Sonny's Blues*. But for the most part, I think that we did do old white men and I think that's like a subconscious thing, mainly because for so long in the world we've always thought only, you know, old white men have contributed to the world, no one else – not women, not Black people, not anyone who's not white or old. So, I think that kind of subconscious way of thinking may have kind of structured some of what we learned without [the professors] even really thinking about it. Because I feel like there are probably a lot of other types of people, genders, other people who have made great contributions as opposed to the great, like, Aristotle, Socrates, obviously Descartes, all these great people. But I'm sure there were other people. ... I just think that it just has to be another choice for consciousness. Because I feel like the default is so often like white male, you know, especially if you go into a beauty store or something. It's like "This is nude" and I'm like, "This is nude for like *white* people, not for *Black* people!" [laughing] ... It's just like a default setting where it's just one way.

It's possible that the women's ages and recent exposure to humanities coursework in a traditional college setting better prepared them to make comparisons between the Clemente content and content they'd covered elsewhere, however other graduates and students who had college experience (some of whom had earned bachelor's and master's degrees by the time I interviewed them) did not take issue with the material covered in Clemente. In an earlier conversation with one of the sisters, she remarked that race was a "big topic" in their home, which might lead one to believe that the women were primed to speak critically about race and perhaps more likely to notice disparities in the curricula.

It's worth mentioning here, too, that in two years' worth of classroom observations of Clemente, the notion of a "canon" came up exactly two times. Each discussion was no longer

than about 10 minutes and, from my perspective, it didn't seem that anyone left the classroom with a substantive understanding of the term, how it related to the course, or in what ways a canon might be controversial, especially if it were being taught to a classroom of historically marginalized adults.

In one instance, an art history instructor attempted to explain the term as it related to art but was derailed by off-topic students and uncooperative technology. In another instance, a student initiated a discussion about what constitutes "literature," but the conversation centered more on genres and preferences and far less on the meaning of the canon. During the discussion, a student held up her copy of the book they were reading in class at the time, which was a noncanonical work, and asked the instructor, "Would this be considered literature?" Without waiting for a response, a classmate, who assumed that it *was* considered literature, added, "Why *is* that considered literature, because that's just a compilation of interviews. I loved it, but it's just a compilation of interviews." The instructor responded that it was literature because "it's *crafted* – the lines, the people she [the author] chose to talk to, the settings. ... It definitely blurs lines. It's like a collage." While that is arguably true, it doesn't explain why one text might be considered "literature" but another might not, or why certain texts were chosen for students to interrogate over the course of the year, but others were not.

Perhaps more important is that students find relevance in the work presented to them, whether canonical not. Time and again, students referred to the curriculum as "relevant" to them in some way: "Everything about that course was relevant," "He [professor] made it all relevant to us," or "I could relate what was I learning to my life, you know what I'm saying?" For example, Al, a 2016 graduate, remarked on how his philosophy professor made the readings "relatable" by making connections between the texts and contemporary life, and Al was subsequently able to

connect the readings to his own life experiences:

He [professor] really dug in deep and made it very relatable, easy to follow. ... The funny thing about it, it was almost as if a lot of the things that I did in life started to make sense when we started reading the philosophies. Because then it sort of sounded as if, you know what? I'm not the first one to go through this. I'm not the first one to see this. ... It's been eye opening and at the same time it allowed me to view my life in many different ways. ... He made it incredibly relevant, you know?

Similarly, Roger, also a 2016 graduate, felt that “all” of the course material was meaningful precisely because the content could be related to the present day:

All of it was impactful because it dealt with like, a lot of the topics had to do with a lot of things that are going on in society now which made it very relevant, and it gave people the opportunity to have an opinion about something because what goes on nowadays affects everybody.

Shalisa, a 2015 graduate, had no interest in history until taking the US history portion of

Clemente, where the professor made clear associations between history and contemporary life:

I've never really thought of myself as being interested in history. But the professor, he just made everything sound so, he made it so that I can relate history to my life today and kind of see how history is shaping the world that we're in.

### **Dominant Cultural Capital**

So is Clemente a colonizing force? Does Clemente colonize students into elite culture?

Traditionally, courses in the humanities hoped to introduce students to texts in which they could appreciate “high culture” and participate in the community of the elite (Alford & Elden, 2013).

Without explicitly using the term, students and graduates consistently referenced the concept of dominant cultural capital – high status cultural attributes, codes, and signals – and the ways in which they had acquired and activated cultural capital through Clemente (Carter, 2003). Cultural capital was popularized by Pierre Bourdieu, who argued that individuals from different social positions are socialized differently (Lareau, 2015). Socialization gives us a sense of what is comfortable and seemingly normal, which he termed habitus. The habitus can be viewed “as a

system of lasting, transposable dispositions which . . . functions at every moment as a matrix of *perceptions, appreciations, and actions*” (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 82-83; italics in the original). The amount and forms of capital (i.e., economic, social, cultural) one inherits and draws upon in the social world are dependent upon one’s background and life experiences (Bourdieu & Passeron 1977; Lareau, 2015). It follows, then, that disenfranchised adults often lack access to capital that might support their aspirations. As Prudence L. Carter (2003) succinctly summarizes, “Cultural capital provides individuals with an ability to ‘walk the walk’ and ‘talk the talk’ of the cultural powerbrokers in our society” (p. 138).

Cultural capital exists in three forms. The first is in an embodied state, “in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 47). The second is an objectified form such as “books, works of art, and scientific instruments that require specialized cultural abilities to use” (Swartz, 1997, p. 76). The third is an institutionalized state that refers to educational qualifications. There is considerable debate about the applicability of cultural capital, however. As Carter (2003) argues, many academics link Bourdieu’s concept of cultural capital to the characteristics of the white, upper classes (DiMaggio, 1982; DiMaggio & Mohr, 1985; DiMaggio & Ostrower, 1980; Lamont & Lareau, 1988). Cultural capital appears to hinge on the dispositions and experiences of the dominant class. Though some scholars draw attention to the concept’s “ethnocentric bias,” the cultural capital of non-dominant groups is typically discounted or disregarded entirely (Carter, 2003, p. 137; Erikson, 1996; Hall, 1992; Swartz, 1997).

It’s clear that dominant cultural capital is being reproduced through Clemente to some degree, and while students’ life experiences are recognized in the classroom, little attention is paid to the non-dominant cultural capital that they possess. Even so, the students seem to

overwhelmingly value the dominant cultural capital that is transferred to them through the classical knowledge and seemingly elite cultural experiences of Clemente, rather than feeling that they are being dominated or unwittingly imposed upon. Through Clemente, students are exposed to so-called high culture. They study the classics, and are afforded the opportunity to participate in cultural spaces that before seemed off limits to many students. They are given free tickets to plays, operas, symphonies, poetry readings, lectures, museums, and galleries, among other events. When I taught high school, my colleagues and I would often hear, “Why I do need to know this stuff?” or “When am I ever going to use this?” from our students. Never once did I hear those sorts of things from a Clemente student, and, as a participant observer in the class, I was privy to many whispers, grumblings, and side-eyes. Even when students mentioned not enjoying or connecting with various aspects of the course, like Abstract Expressionism, for example, or Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*, they never denigrated it or suggested that it was oppressive.

Numerous students and graduates spoke about how they had not participated in “elite” cultural activities until Clemente. Rick, in his late 40s, was so nervous about attending his first play that he raised his hand at the end of class on a Thursday to ask what he should wear to the play on Saturday. After class, he asked if he could text me because, he said, “I know I’m gonna have questions, like what time should I get there Saturday? Are my shoes gonna be OK?” And indeed he did text me several times, most notably when he arrived nearly an hour early and wondered if it was OK to wait in the lobby. After that play, I watched students as they congratulated some of the actors and took countless pictures of themselves in the theatre. They were exuberant and smiling, talking about the plot, the actors, and the fact that they *understood* the Shakespearean dialogue. In short, they were visibly proud and happy to be there. At another

point, I attended *Romeo and Juliet* with a group of students and towards the end of play, when Romeo kills himself, I could hear a student sniffing behind me. I grabbed a little pack of Kleenex out of my purse and turned around to see tears streaming down the woman's face. "I can't stop crying," she mouthed to me as I handed her the tissue. When the play ended and the lights came up, I turned around to her again. "It was just so beautiful," she said. This is someone well past middle-age who would not have attended the play if not for Clemente but was moved to tears. In both cases, the audiences were almost entirely white with the exception of the Clemente students. Were they being colonized into dominant culture? Was that a bad thing?

Students had similar experiences at art museums. Jason, an art history professor, explained that he *wants* to transfer dominant cultural capital to students. "I want them to be able to walk into a museum and feel like they belong there, to walk into a gallery or walk into an artist's studio and kind of think that it has some relevance to them," he said. Although he'd been teaching in Clemente for only a couple years, he felt he'd been successful in that regard: "They [students] say, 'This is the first time I've been here, and I feel like I know what I'm doing' or 'This is the first time that I've been able to walk through the doors and have something to say about the artworks.'" Two long-time course directors from different sites similarly recounted students' experiences at art museums:

Isabella: I remember I had a woman before who told me after our first visit at the art museum, [she said] "Oh, Isabella, now you know I've lived here for 15 years, and this is the first time I've been to the museum." I mean, you can go to the museum every Thursday night for free, and many other museums. It's, again, just kind of self-exclusion, people thinking, "Well, what would I do at the museum?" or "What do I have to say?" Then they realize that you don't have to be an art historian to actually go in, appreciate it, and not be afraid to express your opinion and maybe read a little bit about it and not be so quick to judge.

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Laura: She [a course graduate] ran into the art history teacher at the museum on an evening that it was open late. The teacher said, “What’re you doing here?” and she said, “I just came to get reacquainted with my painting” because she had to write a paper [for an assignment in Clemente] about a painting, and so she’d spent a lot of time on this one painting. You know, here’s this woman who had never been to an art museum before and probably, you know, didn’t really think it was relevant. Now, she, like, *owns* the painting, you know? So feeling like they belong at the theatre or at the museum, that they have a right to understand things, that they can engage with educated people.

Priscilla, a 2015 graduate who had started the course the year prior, quit for employment reasons, and then completed it the next year, said something similar:

I’ve passed by the art museum I don’t know how many times. To have someone take me in and stop and explain everything ... It’s not as intimidating. It’s no more part of just background scenery, you know? It’s part of your life now because someone has exposed you to it.

Brenda, a 2014 graduate aged 61, valued all of the cultural experiences, including eating Vietnamese food for the first time. Her class went on a walking tour of their city and ended their day with a meal at a Vietnamese restaurant chosen by Clemente staff.

Brenda: Going to the art museum with Professor Joseph, that was phenomenal. My family and I came to this city in 1957. I was two years old. *I had never been to that museum.* We got to see great plays and the symphony. I had never been there. I had never been there, got front row seats.

Charity: Really?

Brenda: Yes. And I told one of the musicians I loved her shoes because I was right there! [laughing] ... I had never eaten Vietnamese food. I didn’t know the history behind the bridge. I just learned so much. I was like a little girl, Charity.

Many students also reported that having knowledge of the humanities, particularly philosophy, opened up opportunities for conversation and helped students understand cultural references they didn’t understand before.

Luciana: Sometimes people make references to things and now you understand where these references are coming from, you know what I mean? So for

me it just it makes me feel really smart. I'm like, "Oh yeah, I know what you're talking about. That's what I saw in so-and-so book." Yeah, it just makes you feel smarter. It cultures you.

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Tisha: It's crazy how I watched an episode of this show that I follow, and at the end of each show she [the main character] would have a quote or something that she says significant. She actually mentioned Plato, and I feel like that would have went over my head if I didn't do Clemente. So, that made me go, "I know what she's talking about." ... Another example would be, I was in math class [at community college] and this one girl had wrote a paper on all of philosophy. ... So we had a big discussion on Socrates. She even sent her papers, and I was like, "Wow, she had a really good point," and I was able to, like, look at everything and because I learned it in Clemente.

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Priscilla: My church that I was attending, my pastor also, like, majored in philosophy and he has his doctorate in philosophy. So, it was really, it was like marrying some things for me ... because he would reference like Nietzsche, and I'm like, "*Really?!?*" ... So going to class, I was pretty much able to keep up in church! So I loved it because I was able to initiate conversations with other people in church and even in my family because it just, it brings about a new perspective. ... I don't know how many times I've referenced, like, Plato! So, I just turned into, like, a mini philosopher.

Similarly, a history professor recalled how two Clemente graduates who worked at a nursing home were able to speak with the residents about content they'd learned in the course:

I remember two women, they work as CNAs, Certified Nursing Assistants, in like a nursing home or something. The TV was on in somebody's room or whatever, and Plato was mentioned. And they were like, "Plato?! I know all about the cave!" So it's like some little keys to society at large have kind of been opened to them.

Clemente provides all course books to students, and numerous graduates, some of whom were a decade post-graduation, said things like, "I still have my books," "My books are right here," and "Even like right now, to this day, I still have my books sitting right by my bed and every now and then I still open them up, and I'll read those stories again, go over the lessons. ... Just to gain more understanding, and I also pass the information on to others as well." The books – cultural

capital in an objectified state – were meaningful to the students, and it was clear from our conversations that they were proud to have them in their homes. Rick recalled with pride how a Clemente professor gave him her personal copy of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (students read photocopied excerpts and were not given copies of the book for class). Reading, or even just holding, course books while riding public transportation sparked conversation:

Rick: Even the book that she [professor] handed over to me, she let me have the *Leviathan*. Then someone had saw that book. I was on the train, I was reading, and then they said, “Oh, you’re reading *that*? What’re you doing?” And it opened up a door for a conversation.

Charity: On the train?

Rick: You know, on the train, just like [previously] I was on the train and reading Plato, and someone said, “Hey, that’s Plato. What’re you doing? Where are you going?” So, the material that I had gave me a sense of, it strengthened my confidence. It gave me some more confidence. It made me want to read the material, like, “Wow, they [others] see that. How do you read this thing? What is this about?” I had the opportunity to meet someone ... she’s very conscious-minded about different things, and she went to college. ... and I find her very, very intriguing and smart. So, when I sit to have a conversation with her, I automatically think of Clemente, and I think of the professors and I think of the political theory, even some of the philosophy because we, believe it or not, we sit and have conversations about these things. I was like, wow, like, if I would’ve never experienced some of the things that we spoke about in political theory – the system, Rousseau – I would’ve never been able to engage in those conversations.

These excerpts highlight the cultural capital that is transmitted to students, as well as the pride they take in going to museums, having books, catching elite cultural references, and participating as equals in intellectual conversations. Their words suggest that being exposed to new food, places, language, etc., encourages them to more fully participate in society. So many things, as Priscilla said, are no longer “background scenery” but, rather, become a part of their life.

In *Inside Higher Education*, Peter Powers, dean of the school of humanities at Pennsylvania’s Messiah College, cited a possible consequence of “inculcating” students into a

seemingly foreign culture: creating conflict for them in their communities. “It may look like just acquiring cultural capital to us,” Powers argues, “but it can create isolation and cognitive dissonance for them within their home communities,” (Lederman, 2013, n. p.). Course directors recounted how, at various times, students had left relationships, quit jobs, and even left churches (and religion altogether) after the Clemente course, and the students in such cases had attributed the course to their life changes. Aurora, a 2005 graduate, speculated that many relationships become fraught when one member tries to better herself, and that might contribute to attrition (more on attrition in Chapter 8). In Aurora’s words:

A lot of times too you’re already in a relationship. You either married or may have a significant other. They knew you when you were just you. But now your eyes are wide open and you are becoming educated, and you’re coming home talking about Camus and you’re talking about, you know, the Allegory of the Cave. You’re talking about all of these great things, and, you know, Plato. All of those are awakening. You begin to speak about those things and then the person that you’re with, they end up feeling, oh, you know, that they’re going to be left behind. So, a lot of times because we don’t want to hurt them, and because they’ve been in our corner, and we’ve been together all the time before this happened, you pretty much bow out, gracefully bow out.

In fact, my field notes reveal an instance where an active and vibrant student, Tonya, described wanting to talk about the course with her boyfriend, who was unreceptive:

Tonya tells the class that she tries to share readings, the art, and the music from the concert at the art museum with her boyfriend. She shows him the books and handouts. “He thinks I’m a modern day hippie,” Tonya tells the class. “I think he’s still stuck in that cave.” She makes a gesture to suggest a cave. Laura, the course director, says, “*Hippie* is interesting. Is that because he thinks what you’re studying is impractical?” Tonya says she “thinks different” than her “age group,” which is early 40s, and “race,” which is Black, to begin with. “He wouldn’t really open up,” she says about her boyfriend. “But my mother does. She likes when I read to her from the books.”

What’s interesting about this excerpt is that despite her enthusiasm for the course and active participation, Tonya dropped out shortly thereafter without explanation.

### **The Value of the Humanities to Low-Income Communities**

The vast majority of students and graduates, however, reported talking to their family

members, friends, colleagues, and church communities about the course and did not report experiencing isolation or cognitive dissonance (which isn't always necessarily bad). As one would expect, though, some were more receptive to the idea of the course than others. *Every* student, including drop-outs, wholeheartedly recommended the course, and one graduate made a point to show me the crumpled Clemente flyers he carries in his backpack to give to people he thinks might make good candidates for the course. They feel like the course affords them something valuable, and they think the course has something to offer others of similar circumstances and backgrounds.

Students believed that the course could play an important role in low-income communities in particular. They articulated a variety of ways in which the course could be useful to disenfranchised individuals. Most commonly, they said that Clemente can help to “empower,” “enlighten,” and “inspire” others of similar demographics. As Jay, a 2016 graduate in his early twenties, said, “It motivates people. It gives people hope.” Other students echoed his response:

Ronald: One thing I respect and I do believe is that education is an empowerment and when you're educated you make more rationalized decisions. You see things in a different perspective. ... Because then we create better people, and by creating better people, they can impact our communities, and it makes for a better community and then it grows from there.

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Estelle: They'll [Clemente] empower you to see that where I am now is not where I have to be. ... It gives you the confidence to take the next step and ask those questions that pertain to you. You get to where you need to be. It makes you hungry for more.

Estelle's belief that the course prompts students to ask themselves questions was a common refrain. Others believed that the Clemente experience would be beneficial because it exposes students to new perspectives. As Chadwick, a 2014 graduate commented, “It just opens the

person up to all kinds of other avenues.” Brenda and Duke, recent graduates in their 60s and 40s respectively, similarly expressed that the course provides students with new perspectives, which they would otherwise not be exposed to in their home communities.

Brenda: What I love about Clemente is for the urban community, this is an opportunity that without Clemente, people like myself, we couldn’t afford.

Charity: Do you think that this kind of course can have an impact in urban communities or low-income communities?

Brenda: Yes, absolutely, because people, I think people, we want stuff, we just don’t know where it is. And you know what, Charity? Truthfully, if you only hang around your own people, you are so limited, so limited.

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Duke: I think that a lot of times people in low-income communities don’t read. They’re in kind of like an echo chamber and they hear things from each other that reinforce their negative views on the outside world, the outside larger white world. I think being introduced to history and literature and art and other people who write about even current events from a different perspective – maybe a woman’s perspective, maybe the perspective of a foreign national. Any contact that someone in the community can have with that kind of information can only make things better for them. Because they kind of take it home, and maybe they talk about the experiences. Other people may get interested in what they have to talk about. You never know how or when someone is going to inspire someone else, you never know.

Several graduates also stressed that public education is sorely lacking in low-income communities, and Clemente presents an opportunity to fill in educational gaps left by the public school system.

Ornella: For sure, there are people that I’ve met that I know would’ve *never* even been able to go back to school had Clemente not existed. ... Because most of the people in there [Clemente] being low-income are coming from the public school system. Coming out of the school system, very often they didn’t get what should have been exposed to them while they were there. ... They’re not delivering what they should, especially to people of low incomes who might not have parents who know what to expose their children to. So, very often people slip through the cracks, and Clemente is a way to get people thinking about things that they never even thought

about, a world that they didn't even know existed.

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Allie: Well, more education is never a weakness, education about people and about the beautiful things that people do is missing in a lot of ... education. ... People are important to people and you cannot make that go away, so if you can teach people about people, you're going to be better off in the end.

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Debbie: Low-income communities, I think they would [benefit] because when you're in low-income or poverty-stricken communities, like so many years I was in, sometimes you can't get quality education. But I think it [Clemente] will help, because if you don't know about getting into school, when I say school I mean college. So I think that it'll help you and they're there for you. So, I think it's a good thing that the program exists and it probably just needs to be – you know, the whole thing – needs to be in other places because so many people can benefit from it.

Some students believed that members of historically marginalized communities feel deeply discouraged and ashamed, and that Clemente can help to pull them out of those feelings in part by encouraging them to ask questions and examine themselves. This idea is in keeping with bell hooks (2003) who argues that, "Like all members of subordinated groups who must cope with the negative stereotypes imposed upon them in circumstances where dominators rule, African Americans have suffered and continue to suffer trauma, much of it the re-enactment of shaming" (p. 94). hooks (2003) uses a definition coined by Rossum and Mason (1989) in their book *Facing Shame: Families in Recovery*: "Shame is an inner sense of being completely diminished or insufficient as a person. ... A pervasive sense of shame is the ongoing premise that one is fundamentally bad, inadequate, defective, unworthy, or not fully valid as a human being" (p. 94). Ann-Marie suggests that some individuals in low-income communities are deeply discouraged:

Ann-Marie: A lot of our people in the low-income community are discouraged. ... Sometimes they're closed-minded, or ashamed, or they've just been so oppressed that they turn into something they don't even realize they've turned into.

Charity: What is it about the humanities that could be beneficial to them?

Ann-Marie: They get to look at themselves, they get to examine themselves, they get to ask themselves questions: Why do I exist? Why do I want to do this? It helps them to get a better understanding as to what will make them better. It won't be the material things, because sometimes when you're deprived, all you want to do is *have*. Sometimes then when you are having, there is no purpose and you're still empty. So, it's to get them to understand what is really important. Most of the time they probably do have what really is important but they can't understand because they're focusing on what they *don't* have.

Students readily concede that it's not easy to reach low-income communities, particularly individuals who feel shamed and oppressed, as Ann-Marie mentioned. Many course directors stated that despite the perks of the course, recruitment is often challenging, even for well-established courses. A seasoned course director told me, "We have a really a hard time recruiting, which seems crazy to me because *it's free*. We've been around for 15 years." Likewise, a director of a course just a few years old said that recruitment was more challenging than raising money for the course, but he had anticipated the opposite. Students were often critical of their home communities and argued that Clemente faces an uphill battle in reaching prospective students in disenfranchised areas, largely because members of those communities "don't trust." Others added that people could be suspicious – "They wanna know why you want me to do this?" – as well as focused on financial, not intellectual, gain – "Most of the time if they're not given any money, they don't see the point."

Others suggested that disenfranchised individuals might not readily see the utility of the course. As Luciana, a mother of three in her early forties and a 2016 graduate, explained, she tried to talk about the course with family members but it largely fell on deaf ears.

Even though it's targeted towards low-income, low class, you know, low-income communities, I don't think that they [Clemente] are going to reach them. ... They don't know what philosophy is and they find it intimidating. So, they don't even, they're like, "No, it's not for me." They're not interested in having a lot of different views of the world and learning about all those ancient things. ... They're like, "How is that going to help me? How am I going to benefit?" I'm like, "But you don't understand, it's just awesome stuff to know." ... Even now what I tell people is that what you get, it's the *exposure*. Because philosophy and talking about the good life, ... I tell them that what you find is that it's all relatable. It just helps you think better, think broader, and that's what I tell them.

Luciana's comment about "exposure" draws attention again to the potential cultural capital that students gain through the course as well as the critical thinking skills it engenders (more on critical thinking in Chapter 6). An overarching theme of students' responses was that *any* education would benefit low-income communities, and an education in the humanities would be particularly useful because it encourages students to ask questions and make connections between the course material and their own lives, helps them understand history, and encourages rational, well-reasoned thought.

## **Conclusion**

To summarize, Clemente draws a range of students who take the course for a variety of reasons, but very few take it *because* it's a humanities class. Many have no idea what the humanities actually are and instead apply to the course because they're seeking a change in their lives or simply want to complete something start to finish. Others want to fulfill a desire for education; as Carol so poignantly said of herself, many prospective Clemente students have "an aching inside of [their] heart[s] to go to school." The education students receive is a survey, which draws heavily, though not entirely, on the Western canon. While classical and non-classical texts are often taught alongside each other, the material that graduates recall as being most impactful is almost always canonical, like Socrates, Plato's Allegory of the Cave, Sophocles' *Antigone*, Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations*, Kant's categorical imperative, and *The*

*Social Contract* by Rousseau. Understanding these works is important to the students and they take pride in recognizing humanities references in popular culture and taking part in humanities-related discussions outside of Clemente. The cultural events that students attend while a part of Clemente are likewise important to them. Though financial constraints often prevent graduates from frequently attending such events post-Clemente, graduates do take advantage of free tickets when offered by their courses, and several spoke of taking their children to free nights at museums and taking their grandchildren to matinee plays at the theatre.

While the canon has been fiercely debated by scholars and is a regular topic of discussion among Clemente faculty, students seem largely unaware of any potential controversy. Drawing attention to the idea of a Western canon, and teaching students how to deconstruct it, does not appear to be a priority among Clemente faculty. This leads critics to see Clemente as a potentially colonizing force, imposing dominant cultural values on vulnerable, disenfranchised adults. But it is important to note, as Irving Howe (1991) does, that

Much depends on the character of the individual teacher, the spirit in which he or she approaches a dialogue of Plato, an essay by Mill, a novel by D. H. Lawrence. These can be, and have been, used to pummel an ideological line into the heads of students. ... On the other hand, the texts ... can be taught in a spirit of openness, so that students are trained to read carefully, think independently, and ask questions. This is what we mean by liberal education – not that a teacher plumps for certain political programs, but that the teaching is done in a “liberal” (open, undogmatic) style. (n.p.)

Clemente’s pedagogical approach is indeed open and undogmatic. This approach, and the sense of community it engenders in the classroom, will be further explored in Chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5: Community

“If I had to put a finger on what I consider ... a good radical education, it wouldn’t be anything about methods or techniques. It would be loving people first. ... And then next is respect for people’s abilities to learn and to act and to shape their own lives. ... The third thing grows out of caring for people and having respect for people’s ability to do things, and that is that you value their experiences.” (Horton & Freire, 1990, p. 177)

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Clemente is a unique educational experience, bringing together a wide range of students into a single classroom. Students range from 18 upward; men, women, and gender nonconforming; immigrants and US-born; various races and ethnicities; some who completed college courses and some without even a GED; some employed, some homeless; some formerly incarcerated; some managing mental and physical illness; in short, the Clemente classroom represents a true range of life experiences and is arguably more diverse than a typical college humanities class. Despite the diversity among Clemente’s students, a strong sense of community is routinely formed among them, and time and again, they reported that they felt they were part of a “family” – what they called the “Clemente family.”

During the fall of 2016, I visited a Clemente course that I had previously spent a year with collecting data. It was the first class of the new academic year and the makeshift classroom and hallway were buzzing with nervous, excited energy. There were several course graduates there from prior years whom I’d come to know through my research. They had, on repeated occasions, told me that I was part of the “family,” and so we greeted each other like family: We hugged, and laughed, and asked how each other’s lives had been since we last spoke. I was talking with Pilar, a Clemente administrator, when Tisha, a graduate, came over to us. Both Pilar and I hugged Tisha and welcomed her back. She was there to speak to, and more or less cheerlead, the 2016-2017 incoming class. After our greeting, Tisha stepped back and sighed. “I

feel like I'm *home*," she said, and she leaned in and wrapped her arms around both Pilar and me again. Tisha's words were at the forefront of my mind that evening and stayed with me for quite some time afterward. Until Clemente, I had never been in an educational environment where classmates genuinely thought of themselves as family, an educational environment where students felt so comfortable and so accepted that it felt like "home." How, I often wondered, does this come to pass? How does a 23-year-old African American woman like Tisha, who works two jobs to make ends meet, come to feel that a humanities course is "home"? Clemente is inclusive in that it provides broad access to education, but that alone doesn't guarantee community, so how *are* communities created in Clemente and Clemente-inspired classrooms and why does creating community matter? This chapter will explore how community is fostered in Clemente classrooms, the relationships that classmates forge, and the ways in which community contributes to students' experiences in the course.

Henry Giroux (1988), one of the founding theorists of critical pedagogy, once posed the question, "Can learning take place if in fact it silences the voices of the people it is supposed to teach?" and he determined that the answer was "Yes. People learn that they don't count" (p. 97). Clemente students often enter the course having had educational experiences that have left them feeling silenced and as if they don't matter; they enter the course with internalized feelings of inadequacy, doubt, and fear about their ability to learn. They are, in many ways, what Kirsten Olson (2009) terms "wounded learners." For many of Clemente's historically marginalized adult students, the idea of returning to formal schooling is, in their words, "intimidating," "overwhelming" and even "terrifying." They fear returning to what Chovanec and Lange (2010) call "inflexible postsecondary educational environments that do not take their needs into account" and, unfortunately, such educational environments are the ones to which they are

accustomed. But that's where Clemente differs from a traditional postsecondary environment – it targets disenfranchised learners and *strives* to take their needs into account.

### **Building Community**

Biesta (2010) suggests that students have become convinced that education is “something dead and not at all concerned with them or their lives” (p. 86). He argues that teachers can help make education something more than “temporarily marketable skills and an already obsolete certificate,” but to do so requires that they “read their [students’] world and not just ours. ... It requires us to leave the podium and join the fray” (Biesta, 2010, p. 86). Many, if not most, Clemente directors and instructors do indeed “join the fray” to support students’ learning. This means going beyond simply teaching content to *engage* with students about course content and their lives. Alejandra, a 2007 course graduate now in her late 20s with an MSW and practicing social work, recalled how, unlike traditional college environments, Clemente staff actively sought to keep students in the course and move them toward graduation:

Rebecca [course director/instructor] literally keeps in contact with all of the students. ... She figures out what you need and she eliminates any excuse that you might have. People say they don't have daycare, she put a daycare in. People say, “Well, I'm coming from work. I might be hungry.” She provides the meal and snacks. I mean everything that people use as excuses why they can't further their education, she squashes all of that. “I don't have a ride.” She gives you a ride, you know? “I need help with my homework.” She will literally schedule the time to help you with your homework, for you to understand it.

Jennie, a 2015 graduate who had initially signed up for the course a decade prior but was derailed by incarceration, echoed Alejandra's experience. Jennie underscored the role of the course director, whom she called a “mama bear,” in supporting student success:

She [course director] makes it her goal to just get you through that program. I mean I hate to make her sound like this little superwoman, but, I mean, she emails us constantly. If you're missing, she comes to you. I mean, we've had actual members *go to jail* and she visits them with the work, she sits down and she does it with them. She makes sure that we get it done. I mean, she is also not one of those that's going to let us push through

without having completed anything, we're not going to do that.

Darnell, a chef in his late 40s who did not complete the course, also highlighted the role of the course director, Laura, in fostering relationships with students and supporting their learning.

Although he did not graduate, Darnell had only positive things to say about the Clemente experience and valued the relationships he'd forged with classmates and staff:

Darnell: Laura was not only like a teacher, she was like a friend, like a homey, you know what I'm talking about?

Charity: Right, all in one.

Darnell: All in one, right. You know, it was like whatever you need to talk about, she would listen to you – *I mean really give you her attention*. So, yeah, Laura now, we connected. She connects with people. She keeps it 100, you know? She keeps it real. She's not going to show up for nothing, you know what I'm saying?

Engaged pedagogy begins with the assumption that students learn best when there is an interactive relationship between them and the instructor. Getting acquainted and forging relationships is crucial to truly engaged pedagogy. To this point, hooks (2010) recounted how earlier in her teaching career she failed to build relationships from day one:

I did not take the time to ask students to introduce themselves or to share a bit of information about where they were coming from and what their hopes and dreams might be. I noticed, though, that when I did make time for everyone to get acquainted, the classroom energy was more positive and more conducive to learning. (pp. 19-20)

Clemente courses typically begin with an orientation class, where students and faculty introduce themselves and students get acquainted with the syllabi. As Ruthie, a Clemente graduate who's taken the course "on and off" for the past seven years purely for pleasure, recounted:

We get the red carpet when we get there. They [professors] tell you about themselves, they ask you about yourself, and this way we have like a one-on-one conversation, not only with each other but with the entire class and we get to know about each other even

before the class starts.

In the Clemente orientation classes of which I was a part, introductions were detailed affairs, and individuals provided background information on themselves and explained what drew them to the course and what they hoped to achieve. At one site, students and faculty played a protracted version of the “name game” where each person had to recall the names of those who had already introduced themselves, such that the last person to introduce herself had to recite the name of each person in the room; that night, there were well over 40 adults crammed into the classroom. Needless to say, introductions were more personal, and more time consuming, than anything that might occur in a typical college classroom. Unlike many traditional university classrooms, though, Clemente strives to build a classroom community from day one. One graduate painted it in rather utopian terms: “That first day you walk in, it’s like one big happy family. Everybody is happy to be with each other.” The graduate’s remark reminded me of a course orientation I attended where the director announced to the class *on the first night*, “We’re a family here. You feel that, right?”

Staff often sit among students and talk with them about their lives during dinner before class throughout the year, and sometimes attend outside events like the symphony or plays with the group. In short, they make a point to know the students as *people*, not as vessels to be filled with knowledge because, as hooks (2010) argues, to build community, it’s essential that the teacher and students take time to get to know one another. Josh, a 2015 graduate, explained how the rituals of welcoming and eating together helped foster community among the group:

It’s not just a classroom where you go in and, you know, you’re assigned something, the teacher says, “Follow the board, follow what I’m saying.” The [Clemente] teacher actually engages. There is just the time of, like, settling in, welcoming everybody. There would always be food because you come after work. So, there was this big sense of community.

**Academic and Social Support.** Professors also meet students where they are academically. In interviews and during class, most professors made a point to say they taught the same material at Clemente as in their traditional college classes but “conceptualized” it differently. Marcus, a history instructor, explained:

I teach them, I would say, very much the same material but conceptualized differently. By that I mean a lot of the materials that I used. Because to some extent, the syllabi that I use for some of the Clemente courses were syllabi that I used in the universities. So, I intended to modify them ... because in the population that we’re working with at the Clemente course, it’s primary predominantly African American. So, gearing the syllabus and the content of the course to things that, you know, I thought that they would be really interested in – ... race, the construction of race and kind of looking at how structures affect their life, but stuff that could be related to, how they found themselves in the world. With university students, I could teach a whole class that was just more theoretical or abstract. I would say with Clemente courses, I have it grounded in some material, some concrete stuff that was relatable directly.

Robert, an art history instructor, explained that he taught the same material but didn’t teach as much as he would in a typical semester-long survey course: “So I teach the same material, although less of it because there’s fewer classroom hours.” From my perspective as an observer, this seemed to be the case in every class I was a part of. Instructors taught less material because of time constraints but they also taught less material because the pace was slower. They took more time on any one reading or topic than they would in a more traditional setting. Because the Clemente classroom is composed of such a wide range of experiences and abilities, instructors don’t move on until they believe everyone, or nearly everyone, has a sufficient handle on the material, but in order for everyone to get a handle on the material, instructors must use a variety of pedagogical strategies – Socratic instruction, whole group discussion, small group work, in-class writing exercises, etc. – which, as any teacher knows, takes time. For example, I was a part of a literature class where students worked through a Shakespeare text for several weeks. They would read the text aloud, discuss it, and then listen to an audiorecording of the same passage.

This takes time but ensures that all students are comprehending the material.

There are no exams in Clemente courses, but papers are assigned to students taking the course for credit. In my experience, deadlines are generally flexible, multiple drafts of papers are often encouraged, and, at some sites, formal letter grades are not assigned. As a 2013 graduate, who had also attended some college, said, “It wasn’t like other situations in school where teachers were like, ‘OK, read all these chapters, write the paper on *x*,’ and you’re like, ‘OK, I hope I get an A.’” Clemente directors and professors urge students to contact them about the course content and assignments, and many sites make tutoring available to students before class.

For example, Zia, a 2016 graduate in her thirties and a recent immigrant from North Africa, explained how professors made themselves available and Clemente supported students’ learning with tutors:

The writing professor gave his phone number and email to the class, and I called him and had a phone consultation with him about what to do to write better. Everyone was very accessible. The history professor said we can visit him on the university campus [where he teaches]. When you hear feedback, it can only encourage you more. ... Writing can be intimidating for lots of us. They [Clemente] got us tutors, writing professionals, students at the nearby university. They come before class on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and show us how to improve.

Students were also encouraged to seek assistance with nonacademic matters that might impede their success in the course. Adam, a 50-year-old African American man and 2013 graduate, explained that he had attempted to take the course the year prior but was unable to continue due to a change in his work schedule. But rather than letting the man disappear, never to be seen or heard from again, the course director, Robert, worked with him:

Adam: They’re very supportive in all ways and, you know, you just had to bring it [the issue] to Robert ... and he worked with you. Because I got to know him the first time I went to the program, I got switched from my shift and he helped me come back.

Charity: Oh really?

Adam: That's why I told you I'm 110% behind them! Yeah, I got switched. I was working 11 to 7. They switched me to a 3 to 11, and he gave me the opportunity to come back the next year, right to where I was at. ... Yeah, I mean, I have nothing but great things to say about the program.

Adam's experience speaks to Clemente's commitment to students but also underscores students' complicated lives and unique needs. While the crux of this excerpt is the fact that Robert worked with Adam to continue the course later, we see that Adam was initially working 11pm to 7am, which means that before his schedule was changed, he attended class at Clemente two nights a week until 8:30pm or 9pm at night and then went to work just two hours later for an eight-hour shift.

Chadwick, an African American man who graduated in 2014, struggled with various issues including mental health and involvement in the criminal justice system, and also highlighted how Clemente staff took his needs and history into account:

I had some rough edges coming in there. I had some rough edges *while being there*. But they told me that, that they knew that I had some. What made me a lot better was the fact that they, they didn't just give up on a person like that. They say, "Well, yeah, we're gonna work with you," and they did.

**Valuing Students' Experiences.** Giroux (1992), in his writing on critical pedagogy, argues that "the notion of experience has to be situated within a theory of learning" (p. 17). He suggests that educators must respect students' experiences as well as their need to talk about them in the classroom:

You can't deny that students have experiences and you can't deny that these experiences are relevant to the learning process even though you might say these experiences are limited, raw, unfruitful, or whatever. Students have memories, families, religions, feelings, languages and cultures that give them a distinctive voice. We can critically

engage that experience and we can move beyond it. But we can't deny it. (Giroux, 1992, p. 17)

During my time as a participant observer in Clemente classrooms, I witnessed students talk about a variety of deeply personal experiences that related, sometimes only tangentially, to the course material, and professors gave them the space to share their “distinctive voice.” Students shared their experiences as survivors of rape and abusive relationships and of being incarcerated, losing custody of children, and battling chronic illness. They shared birth and death stories, stories of their past education, and stories about their upbringing. Sondra, a 2008 graduate who subsequently went on to graduate with a bachelor's degree from a Research 1 institution in 2013, suffered significant trauma in her life prior to Clemente. She recounted how the professors gave her space to speak and work through her anxiety:

I was very nervous. I was nervous. I was seeing a psychiatrist about a sleeping disorder called night terrors. I was seeing a psychiatrist for post-traumatic stress, depression, and for anxiety attacks. So, I was very, very nervous and sometimes I would be very, very quiet and other times I had to calm myself down. Because I get too excited and I would just talk too much. I would go to either extreme. But [the professors] and all of the other students were always so patient, everybody was so *patient* with each other. So, I became less shy and less nervous as I saw how the class was going, how we would communicate with each other and how open it was and ... how you could express whatever you were feeling.

Sondra's response highlights the compassion and patience that her professors and classmates had for her life experiences. Roger, too, highlighted the skillful way a professor provided students the opportunity to express themselves fully and then moved the dialogue forward:

Even if you are off-brand and what you're saying makes no sense, she'll let you get it out and then will be like, “OK, OK, let's see what else is going on.” And she did it so easy and comfortable because she did with Winston [classmate], she did it with Albert [classmate]. There was a couple of times she had to reel people back in. She knew how to do it without alienating you and making you feel like your opinion was wrong and not valid.

Similarly, Ruthie, a course graduate who had undergone brain surgery and struggled with memory loss recounted that, “These professors have been wonderful. They understand that I have to take my time doing things and remembering things, and they are right there for me.”

**Dialogic, Problem-Posing Instruction.** In addition to acting with care and kindness – something that educators overlook far too often in favor of simply getting the content across – the pedagogical choices made by Clemente professors also help to engender a sense of community among the diverse learners. Classes are typically taught in seminar style, not a lecture format. Ideally, students are seated in a way so that they can see one another, not in the traditional rows associated with most students’ educational experiences. bell hooks (1994) recalls that she

still remember[s] the excitement I felt when I took my first class where the teacher wanted to change how we sat, where we moved from sitting in rows to a circle where we could look at one another. That change forced us to recognize one another’s presence.

We couldn’t sleepwalk our way to knowledge. (p. 146)

Many times, I entered Clemente classrooms, which often doubled as conference rooms in host organizations during the day, to find students who had arrived early to arrange the chairs and tables into a rectangle. The teaching-in-the-round format that many Clemente instructors favored, coupled with the course’s emphasis on dialogic encounters in a supportive space, facilitated students’ engagement with individuals they may never have encountered or approached otherwise (Hyland-Russell & Syrnyk, 2015).

The most successful Clemente teachers I observed took a student-centered approach to instruction and were able to effectively navigate a classroom of *adults* of varying skill levels. The most successful instructors were warm and welcoming to students, clearly enjoyed teaching,

were excited by the content, and were able to convey the material without unnecessarily lecturing the class. But every class wasn't a homerun, and some instructors were stronger than others. When I think of a "good" night of teaching at Clemente, I think of a particular instructor who always arrived well before class was scheduled to begin and made a point of eating dinner with the students, where he talked with them not just about the class material but engaged students about their lives and current events. He would begin each class by clearly explaining what he wanted to accomplish and would invite input on the material students had been expected to read. His classes were characterized by a near-constant back-and-forth between him and the students – he, reading passages, giving context and explanations, and asking questions, and the students also reading, sharing their ideas, and asking questions. Time passed quickly largely because he kept students engaged in reading, thinking, and talking and, although I would advise otherwise, he would teach for two hours without interruption and not give students a formal break mid-way through the evening. Although we were often abruptly herded out of the classroom by building management, I would often see the instructor talking with students in the lobby or out on the sidewalk after class. On the point of teaching, this particular instructor said:

[College] students are more accustomed to work load in terms of reading and writing. What would be a normal work load for [college], Clemente students would see as overwhelming. During the first year, and you're not going to believe this, I assigned 40 or 50 pages to read, and that was too much! So, I revised the syllabus and the assignments ... The Clemente Course is so different from a traditional college – the environment, the family thing, the camaraderie, and I look forward to it because of those differences. I do feel camaraderie in my other college classes, and my relationship with students, I encourage them to email me. Some [college] professors don't want students to email them. That's just me. I get as much out of it [Clemente] as they do. This is something – listen, I'm a white, middle-class guy from suburbia. [laughs] I'm learning as much as they are. It's rewarding – socially, psychologically, educationally, pedagogically. It's rewarding beyond the remuneration.

I also witnessed unsuccessful teaching, which was typically categorized by a lack of organization, and/or a lack of problem-posing instruction. I observed a particularly ineffective teacher who, I

was told, had taught quite successfully in Clemente years prior and was renowned in his field. This teacher appeared distracted by other commitments in his professional life and, at times, forgot when he was scheduled to teach; arrived late, and thus left students waiting; and didn't have a clear outline for most classes. As an observer, it was often exasperating to watch unfold. The instructor *was* able to build rapport with students and successfully led a couple field trips but didn't succeed with the teaching aspect of the class. As one student told me, "It [the class] just never clicked with me."

But the lackluster teachers are largely outliers, and most Clemente professors use Socratic-style, problem-posing instruction which foregrounds dialogue. The Socratic method of questioning is a disciplined process of dialogue between teacher and students, instigated by the probing questions of the teacher, in an effort to explore the underlying beliefs that shape the students' views and opinions. Though some Clemente professors see the Socratic method as "stultifying" and without equality between the student and the teacher, the version of the Socratic method that I saw, and heard about, in Clemente classrooms was a less formal version. Instructors probed students with questions, but not exclusively, and encouraged dialogue, which, in turn, helped facilitate reciprocal relationships among students and instructors. Al, a 2016 Clemente graduate in his fifties, saw the Socratic style as one of the course's most significant strengths:

Strengths, the fact that it's, what's the name of that? They do it Socratic seminar style where everybody gets to ask questions and tear things apart. The fact that it's easily accessible, no one is made to feel like they just don't have what it takes to be a part of the class. We also like, you know, we were all brought along at a steady pace. At the same time, they were very good at challenging us.

This approach to teaching is couched in "acts of cognition not in the transferal of information" (Freire & Macedo, 1995, p. 67). That is, students and teacher engage in dialogue with one

another, and wrestle with questions *together*: “Dialogue is meaningful precisely because the dialogical subjects, the agents in the dialogue, not only retain their identity, but actively defend it, and thus grow together” (Freire, 2004, p. 101). Luciana expressed how the class always provided a “forum” for students to engage in dialogue, which helped her retain the course material:

We interact with each other, and there is always a forum. We express what we’ve learned and how we feel about what we’ve learned during the course of learning it. It helps to learn. It kind of reinforces what you’re learning, so it makes it easier to maintain that information.

In the engaged classroom, students learn the value of dialogue, and they also learn to speak when they have something to contribute. Understanding that every student has something valuable to offer the learning community means that educators honor *all* capabilities (hooks, 2010). When students are fully engaged, professors no longer assume the singular leadership role in the classroom. Instead, the classroom functions as a collaborative environment where everyone contributes. The typical, vertical teacher-student relationship is shifted to a horizontal one where the teacher shares power with the students and both operate on more equal footing.

Ultimately, all professors want students to learn and to see education as a means of “self-development and self-actualization” (hooks, 2010, p. 22). Zia, the 2016 course graduate referenced earlier, explained how her course’s Critical Thinking and Writing instructor encouraged dialogue and shared leadership with the students by acting as a “mediator” rather than a professor:

There is one thing that really, I really enjoyed is how open the teachers are. They are so open minded. They are trying to let us know that we have a voice, we are entitled to our opinions, we have the right to have opinions, and it doesn’t have to be the same as anyone else. It was encouraging to learn and ... to know that your opinion matters. That is really empowering. ... Like in the Critical Thinking, the teacher would just, you know, ask the question and provoke the conversation. And we’re all here sharing, we don’t even have to ask permission to talk, we’re just exchanging opinions. [She was] just like a

mediator somehow.

What's particularly salient about this excerpt is the importance of dialogue in creating a mutually respectful intellectual community. And Zia's remark – "We don't even have to ask permission to talk" – speaks volumes about the sort of education she was likely exposed to prior to Clemente, an education where students' voices were not valued and where students were taught to ask an "authority" for permission to verbalize their own thoughts and opinions. A similar example comes from Sheree, who graduated from the course at age 19 in 2015. She viewed the instructors as facilitators who challenged students to think critically and encouraged them to respect one another's ideas:

They [professors] challenge you to think more. They challenge you to try to find answers that you probably wouldn't have thought and to help other people come to the same answers or try to understand your opinion. ... And that's what I liked because everyone had a different opinion and it might bring up an argument but because the teachers were there to facilitate, you realize you can have your opinion and I have my opinion.

This notion of teachers acting as facilitators and collaborators was also echoed by Rico, a 2015 Clemente graduate who was simultaneously enrolled in a master's degree program (and was therefore not a typical Clemente student):

I credit the interest in the class to the professor being the guide or the instructional guide person. I think he [philosophy professor] was very insightful and helped to put things in a perspective that I didn't have or had not received in other philosophy-structured classes. So, he empowered me to not feel intimidated by the text, the topic, or the discussion. I think that he was always really conscious of wanting everybody to feel included and allowed that dialectical approach of discussion. I never felt like I was being spoken to, I always thought that it was always a collaboration.

These interview excerpts call to mind the work of Paulo Freire (1970), who described dialogue as an "encounter between men that provides impetus to "name the world" (p. 76): "Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression" (p. 77). Freire (1970) cautioned, however, that dialogue must be rooted in love, humility, and hope, and include critical

thinking, in order to avoid domination. The way out of domination, Freire (2004) reasoned, was for marginalized learners to “become agents of curiosity, become investigators, become subjects in an ongoing process of quest for the revelation of the ‘why’ of things” and engage in a dialectical process of education (p. 90).

This is not to say that all Clemente teaching is dialogic and roundly praised by students, nor that all faculty embrace liberatory pedagogy. For example, Rico, who commended his philosophy professor’s collaborative teaching style, strongly criticized his history teacher, whom he felt lectured and thus alienated him:

I also felt that Marcus [history professor] was just lecturing and that there wasn’t a Socratic dialogue that we had with Kenneth [philosophy professor]. I just can’t learn like that. ... For me to fully grasp and harness an understanding of something, I need to be having a conversation. I need to be talking with my classmates. Maybe we need to be in small groups, maybe we need to take a topic, get into small groups, kind of talk about it, and come back and do a full circle. ... But you [Marcus] are depositing information and, quite frankly, that shit is not going in because I’m not in the conversation with you. It’s like, it wasn’t happening.

I likewise observed some teachers who were better able to facilitate dialogue than others. On one end of the spectrum were a minority of instructors who were accustomed to lecturing and failed at questioning students and provoking substantive discussion; one instructor explained that he felt he had to resort to lecturing because students often had not read the assigned texts and were therefore unprepared to discuss course material. Another instructor, Liz, explained that dialogic pedagogy was by no means easy:

The other thing that’s challenging is knowing it’s a discussion, so you’re asking questions, like any good discussion leader. It’s really hard to find the right question, and then it’s really hard to make yourself shut up so that it just grows and happens. ... Everyone hates the silence. Every teacher hates the silence. You kinda gotta, like, get in the groove of that, try to realize what’s going on in the heads of the people who are in the class.

On the other end of the spectrum were instructors committed to Freirean pedagogy. Rachel, a

Clemente staff member who worked at several sites, commented that one course site in particular embodied the Freirean idea of collaborative education: “I am sure everybody loves quoting Paulo Freire but they [faculty at one site] really embody this idea that this is a space that we share together.” Isabella, the course director at the site referenced by Rachel, explained that she saw her role first and foremost as a community builder:

Well, I think when the course started, when Earl [Shorris] started, the goal was to introduce humanities to people of low incomes so that they can move on in their life blah, blah, blah. ... What I see as a goal for the group is actually what’s happening in the classroom. What they’re reading and what they’re writing might almost be, not the *least* important things to me, but just *one* of the important things. I actually believe [the most important thing] is building the community and making these people part of the larger community. ... So, I think that’s definitely just as important as the actual theoretical material that they read and discuss in class.

Ross, a philosophy professor and course director at a different site, similarly stated that his focus was less on disseminating content and far more on cultivating students’ confidence and critical thinking:

My mission is to help kindle self-esteem and critical thinking with my students, and it doesn’t matter who they are. That to me is more important than whatever it is we’re studying, in a way it doesn’t even matter what we study. ... It’s about feeling good about one’s abilities. That sense of self-esteem can kindle all kinds of things. ... So, that’s why my teaching method is very heavily Socratic. ... Yeah, and that’s why my students always say to me, “We don’t know what you really think.”... I want them to have increased self-esteem and I want them to exercise their thinking muscles and their humanity and rationality, in that order.

Ross, like his students, saw good teaching as the bedrock of a successful Clemente course. In fact, when asked what challenges his course faced, his immediate answer was “maintaining top-flight faculty.”

**The Role of Teaching in Building Community.** When I asked students and graduates what aspects of the course had been particularly impactful or meaningful to them, I expected students to talk about course content. While students *did* talk about the curriculum in many

instances, students most often referred to the quality of the teaching as being most significant. At their annual meeting at Bard College, directors wondered what drew students to the course and kept them interested – what they called the “hook.” An excerpt from my field notes during their meeting reveals the directors’ speculation:

Someone poses the question, “What’s the hook? Is it credits, learning about philosophy, writing? What’s the pull?”

“People want something different,” Valerie suggests.

“The hook is that you’re going to get respected, listened to, and your opinion will be respected,” Sonja adds. “That’s what they take, that’s a hook”

“What keeps them coming back is rigor, intellectual challenge,” Leigh says.

While all of these ideas are probably true to some degree, what most students saw as the “hook” was the teaching; that is what kept them engaged. The words students most frequently used in conjunction with Clemente teaching were “passion” and “passionate” – used 73 times in 76 student interviews. Students *repeatedly* referenced instructors’ enthusiasm for the subject matter, as well as their ability to “reach everyone.” Students talked about feeling valued and several students categorized the teaching style as not only “caring,” but “humane.”

For example, Janelle, a 2016 graduate in her late 40s with some college experience, appreciated the instructors’ love for the material, as well as their visible respect for students:

I think the strengths are the professors who clearly love the material that they’re teaching and clearly enjoy it, who aren’t intimidated, or afraid. ... I never got that sense they were like missionaries going to Africa, teaching the natives, that kind of attitude. I felt like they really respected everybody as adults and their different backgrounds and were open to whatever place everybody is in. ... I think if you had a different kind of professor or someone who didn’t approach it that way, it just wouldn’t go over well. ... The BS meter would have just been up, and it just wouldn’t have gone over well.

Similarly, Anita, a 2016 graduate also with some college experience, echoed Janelle’s feeling that professors didn’t approach students “like missionaries going to Africa.” In Anita’s words, students were respected and not made to feel like a “charity case”:

They made us feel valued in Clemente. It’s fitting, this humanities course, they made us

feel humane, right? And it's a free course, like there is this kind of thing, "OK, this is a free course for people who can't afford to go to school," right? In no way, shape, or form did they make us feel like we were a charity case, I'm just saying. ... They didn't make us feel like a charity case. They just made us feel like you are getting a valuable education from respectable professors.

Jennie, like Anita, described the teaching as more "humane" than traditional college environments and emphasized the "care" professors took for their students:

It's more humane. It's more active. There is a level of care there, there is a concern about understanding and interpreting the knowledge when most places don't take that extra step.

Several students stressed how the professors were able to reach a diverse range of students in the classroom and made each student, regardless of her prior educational experiences or background, feel intelligent. Instructors encouraged students to move from the passive engagement associated with the traditional banking system of education to active engagement:

Adelaide: I think when we grew up, we had what's called a banking system. ... One of the things I realized about his [philosophy professor's] method of teaching was it allowed every person to feel a sense of belonging, like they belonged, like they can participate. It didn't matter if it was just three words, but it counted. He was always open and ready to listen to everyone's opinions, their input, their comments. Even though we're all from different walks of life, different backgrounds, maybe even different academic levels, yet for each and every one of us, we all were at the same learning curve. ... No one felt like, "Oh my God, I'm more intelligent," or "Oh, I'm less intelligent," or "Maybe I can't say anything or my input isn't going to be relevant." Everyone felt like whatever they had to say was relevant.

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Shalisa: I can't speak for every professor, only the ones who I had worked with, but they have a real talent for reaching everybody. Like in my class there were people who, I'm not sure that they finished high school. I'm not sure what their level was, you know what I mean? I'm not sure what their level of education was. Then there were students who were actively in college and there were students of all different ages. Even though a lot of them were just from the same neighborhoods, we're very different with very different backgrounds.

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Thiago: You were able to express yourself and communicate your views, and you were not shut down. It was embraced and it was embraced especially in the philosophy class where all philosophies were welcome to be brought out, put on the table. So, within the classroom, other students would challenge the philosophies of others. So, I thought it was great where people can really exercise their minds, exercise their perspective and also be open to other perspectives as well. I think that is valuable there.

Although students lauded the teaching and the individualized attention they received, both staff and students with college experience readily acknowledged that the Clemente experience of community and support was a long way from the sink-or-swim experience of traditional higher education. Meg, a former long-time course director, noted:

Those students who did come to us and then wanted to go on to a four-year degree, I think had a somewhat rude awakening when they went from the course into a typical institution – whether it was a community college or a four-year degree program because they didn't have the supports in place. We offered [at Clemente], their textbooks were free, their child care was covered. ... In some ways I felt like, are we setting people up with these false expectations that they can actually make this happen for themselves? Because they will have to figure out a lot of other supports to go on. ... That was a challenge that we never quite figured out how to address.

A faculty member similarly brought up concerns about a student who had been admitted to a humanities program for ex-offenders, which he was to begin the summer after graduating Clemente. "I'm a little worried that he's not prepared," she said. "I mean he's so engaged and he's so interested and articulate ... but what [assignment] he gave me was not college material, and I guess I'm a little worried he's going to get there and just get hammered."

Once Alejandra graduated from Clemente in 2007, she moved on to community college, and then a four-year university. She recalled not having enough support from the college and turned to her Clemente instructors for support:

So, while I was at community college, they had a writing center there, but the tutors can only be with you 30 minutes. That to me wasn't enough time because I guess I was spoiled from Clemente. So, I would go back to Michael [Clemente writing instructor]. I

would go and visit him on campus with my papers, and he would grade my papers that were due for another class. He would say, “Oh, I don’t really agree with your teacher, what he said right here,” and we’d laugh. So, they [Clemente] still helped me all along through the entire way even after I left Clemente.

Students like Priscilla with some prior college experience were able to make sharp comparisons between the Clemente experience and their experiences in other postsecondary institutions and, without fail, preferred the type of education they received in Clemente to that of a traditional college environment:

I’m so glad that you brought that up because that’s [Clemente’s] the first time that – it may sound harsh – but being treated like a real person. You know, to have just someone interact with you on such a deeper level, and it could be short. It can be just a short period of time of interaction but it has so much depth to it. Where I think that the interaction itself helps to change people, not just how they see the world but how they see themselves. Because people are not used to being treated in such a way. So, that’s huge.

And there were students like Al, who did not have college experience but hoped that higher education mirrored his experience in Clemente:

I’m allowed to be a free thinker. I’m allowed to kind of absorb things at my own pace. You don’t have the pressure of being in a huge empty theatre of like maybe 300 students and to hear a monotone voice of a professor like 200 feet away. I guess our space is a little crowded, but it feels more, it has more of a family atmosphere. I feel more comfortable knowing that I’m around people that I can communicate with and share thoughts and feelings with and not be judged. ... That’s been invaluable. If college is anything like that, oh my God, that’s going to be fantastic, I’m going to love college.

Al, who planned to complete a bachelor’s degree post-Clemente, was likely to be in for the “rude awakening” mentioned by Meg, as most college experiences are not, in fact, like Clemente.

### **Community in the Classroom**

**Family.** The pedagogical choices made by Clemente’s teachers foster community among the students. They feel valued by their professors, but they also feel valued by *each other*.

When I asked students and graduates to tell me their thoughts about their classmates, they routinely talked about their peers using terms like “family,” “love,” and “bond,” which, again,

are not terms one typically associates with college classmates.

My field notes reveal multiple times when both students and staff referred to the class as a “family” and, I will admit, that the first times I heard this reference, I felt it was disingenuous. I was taken aback when the course director described the group as a family on the first night of class; we hadn’t even *met* each other yet. During the second week of class, I recorded the following notes before class started:

It’s the second week of Clemente and class has not yet started. Tisha says we should do a Secret Santa gift exchange for Christmas, which seems strange to me because it’s over two months away. Luisa thinks this a great idea and says, “Oh, we will.” Luisa’s friend Lori agrees. I say that sounds good. Tisha says, “That would be nice, I’m gonna tell Pilar.” Pilar is a Clemente staff member. I hear Tisha talking to Pilar, and I hear Tisha describing the class as “family.” Winston comes into class and Tisha asks if he wants to sit with them; there’s five students already in the classroom. Winston says yes and makes his way towards the back of classroom where they’re seated. He says he wants to make sure he knows everyone’s names around him, so he says each person’s name as he shakes their hand. Before he sits down, he says to them, “You’re all my family.” Tisha, who’s looking for a new apartment, jokingly says, “Then can you find me somewhere to live?!” Winston says he’s working on it.

Like the first night of class, I puzzled over these exchanges because they seemed premature to me. Did the students *genuinely* see the group as family already? Or was it just rhetoric? My dubious reaction, which I kept to myself, was largely due to my socialization in academia, where classes are not considered families and classmates are typically considered colleagues, not brothers and sisters. Over time, however, my opinion changed, and I came to see that Clemente provided an important sense of community for students. I came to see that students and staff who used the word “family” appeared to do so sincerely, though I, personally, would not use that terminology so soon into the experience.

When asked to describe their relationships with their classmates, students routinely described them as family. Here, Lenore, Tiana, and Roger – each from a different course site and graduation year – express how their classmates functioned as a family:

Lenore: They now have become an extension of my family.

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Tiana: [We] became a little family to where when one was not there, we got a call from somebody, we were emailed, we were texted. To me, it just gave me a new group of friends. . . . Plus, if I found something on the computer, I was always making a copy for them: "Here's just something to help you with the reading." It was like kind of like a little family.

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Roger: When I started the program I told everybody, I'm not getting immersed here, I'm here to get my education. I didn't know it would end up morphing into a nice little extended family where you actually cared about everybody in the room and their situations and what was going on with them. Like, when Juan got sick and he stopped coming, [and] Mark had to go to Georgia, there was a few things that, you know, you send out an email, make sure that everything is OK, just to check on them.

Bruce, an African American man aged 50 who graduated from a course in 2007 and is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in social work, also spoke of how his Clemente classmates became like family: "I had no idea when I got in to it how it would become my family, and this sounds really corny," he said, laughing, "but it was almost like *church*." Jason, a Clemente professor, also mentioned the idea of Clemente functioning like a church community:

One of the things we never talk about, and I think it's because we're academics, is church. I think for a lot of our students there's some relationship between what we're doing and, for some of them, some sort of church experience. This is to say you kind of walk in hoping to find some words of comfort or strength or something that will kind of help you make sense of things. You walk in expecting to find a community that can embrace you in a certain way. You walk in expecting that situation to have a transformative power. I think a lot of them [students] are sort of primed for that by their experience in church, so it's a secular way to get that kind of experience. So, I wonder if, I mean, it feels to me like there must be some interesting crossover there.

Church and religion were often mentioned by Clemente students. Students' church communities were important to them, as one might expect. Many learned of Clemente through their churches and many shared the course with fellow parishioners. Some students commented that the

demographics in the classroom mirrored what they saw in church, but only Bruce and Jason likened the sense of community they experienced in Clemente to that of church.

Just as church fulfils a need for community for many people, several students expressed how Clemente fulfilled a need for social and intellectual community. Thirty-seven of 76 students expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness in their lives and hoped to find “like-minded” individuals who wanted to “learn new things” at Clemente. They hoped that by finding like-minded people, they could forge friendships. Jimena, for example, a 2016 graduate, joined Clemente because of “the possibility of finding a sense of community. I’m not native to the city, so it’s a huge, big deal for me to live here, and not only find friends but a kind of a close-knit group of people to network with.” Luciana, also a 2016 graduate, left an abusive marriage with her three children and moved to a new state before joining Clemente; she said:

I guess I needed help, like, meeting people, and also I guess I’m very isolated in my own personal life. I felt like this will help me, like, kind of come out of my shell in a way. I thought that this might be a good way to start, like, to open up and make friends and meet people. ... I’m kind of finding that there are people that *do* relate to how I think. So, that’s kind of comforting in a way.

Velma, a 70-year-old 2010 graduate, explained that many of her classmates experienced deaths during the course and relied on the social community Clemente provided for support:

I lost my mother in 2009. I had started the class in October and I lost my mother in December. ... But then, like, the whole class was impacted by death. Luke [professor] lost his grandmother. It was predominantly, the class had a lot of Haitian people who that year lost people in Haiti from the ... you know, the quake. ... So, it was like we all hung on because we’d become so close and we’re enjoying the classes. So, we were kind of there for each other. The camaraderie was sensational. It was hard to leave because we almost felt like you needed to have a second part to that [course] and take more classes. So, I wasn’t really ready to actually graduate, though I did well, I wasn’t ready to graduate from there.

**Love.** Many – 30 of 76 – students also used the word “love” to describe their feelings about their classmates. It should be noted that students were using the term in the Platonic sense,

though some romantic love was kindled as well. A course director told me, “We even have a Clemente couple who might get married this year. ... Yes, these two youngsters, so, so cute.” I witnessed firsthand an emotional and ultimately ill-fated proposal in a Clemente classroom as well. From a social work perspective, these proposals were unsettling, particularly the one I witnessed, as the students were lonely, vulnerable, and had known each other only a matter of months. References to romantic love were certainly not the norm, and the overwhelming majority of students who referred to loving their classmates did so in the non-romantic sense:

Rick: I enjoyed the company and the love, and the concern that we had for another, like, “Hey, where is so-and-so?” “Why is so-and-so not here today?” “Hey, did you do the homework?” ... I would want to be always in their lives, and I would always want them to be in my life. It was just really, really a great experience knowing different people. ... I think I have [developed friendships], and if I haven’t, I think that we made an impact in each other’s lives to some extent that will always be with us, even if we don’t never ever see each other again.

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Stephanie: Yeah, I loved my classmates, I did. I loved them tremendously.

Professors, too, used “love” in describing their relationships with students. A Clemente course had experienced the death of one of its graduates, a beloved and enthusiastic student who battled cancer. The literature professor at that course site, who was a favorite among students, said:

[Clemente is] a community, it’s a family. We love each other – the students, the professors. It’s real love. You saw the tremendous emotional response when one of our students died. It was an overwhelming response. There’s a communal connection between us.

Engaged pedagogy establishes a teacher-student relationship that nurtures the growth of both parties, as evidenced by Professor Martin’s claim that “we love each other.” hooks (2010) contends that engaged pedagogy expands both the heart and the mind and “makes us better learners because it asks us to embrace and explore the practice of knowing together, to see

intelligence as a resource that can strengthen our common good” (p. 22). Educator and author Parker Palmer (2007) invokes the idea of love in teaching:

Teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, even breaks the heart – and the more one loves teaching, the more heartbreaking it can be. ... The courage to teach is the courage to keep one’s heart open in those very moments when the heart is asked to hold more than it is able so that teacher and students and subject can be woven into the fabric of community that learning, and living, require. (p. 111)

**Bonds.** In addition to using the terms “family” and “love” to characterize their relationships with classmates, students also talked about forging bonds:

Ann-Marie: The strengths [of Clemente] would be the community, the family, and the bonds that have been created. ... It was just a beautiful experience to be around people that was caring, that genuinely wanted you to learn, that wants what’s best for you, and are happy for you. ... Like I was reading a story about the geese, how they fly in a “V” formation, how they take turns like the one that’s in the front would fly for a certain amount of miles, then the ones in the back will come up and take turns because they help each other. If one of them is ill or sick, two will drop and go down to be with the one that’s sick. So, I want to consider us in the same format where we all contribute to each other’s success. ... There is enough [success] for everyone to have, but it’s for us to work together and allow each one its turn when it’s time.

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Luisa: We bonded during the class so well. ... We all accepted each other and we shared and we helped each other out.

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Anita: It was so much more than just a class, we came there as a unit, we left there as a unit. We became bonded. It was cohesive, we could draw off each other. If you weren’t there, we had somebody to kind of make us accountable other than our professor. Like, they *missed* you when you weren’t there. We were like a dynamic group, and we all *worked*. It was like a band of friends who belong together.

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Carla: I feel like in the class, one thing that's so great about it is that that we're all there for one common thing. I mean, you know, we have all of our differences, but to have that common goal or bond or interest is really powerful. ... I think that's a big part of what keeps people coming back, having that sense of community.

Students' relationships with their classmates demonstrate that building social support systems is key for learning success (Lange, Chovanec, Cardinal, Kajner, & Smith Acuna, 2015). Building community was meaningful to Clemente students because it acted as a source of fellowship and friendship to students, all of whom were disenfranchised in some way and many of whom clearly expressed feelings of isolation and loneliness in interviews. The community was meaningful to students because it also provided accountability; students felt accountable to each other as well as to their instructors. When community is fostered in a classroom, students feel supported and are subsequently more comfortable taking risks – risks as seemingly mundane as asking questions and voicing opinions. And having a class that is also a community is valuable to instructors because it results in fully engaged learners.

### **Using Humor to Foster Community**

Humor, too, proved to be a way of building community, engaging the students, and helping them to feel comfortable in the space and with each other. “Laugh” and its stem words (e.g., laughing, laughter) were used 252 times in my typed field notes, and I know there were instances when I did not annotate laughter in my typed notes – because it seemed unimportant or redundant at the time – and times when I handwrote notes, thus making the actual instances of laughter in the classroom even higher. On the topic of humor, hooks (2010) argues:

Both wit and regular old everyday humor could really serve to create a more open atmosphere in the classroom. Simply put, laughter shared can draw groups closer together. This is especially true in classrooms where there is much that separates, where

diversity is the norm, or where the subjects studied confront students with depressing facts. (pp. 71-72)

Indeed, there is diversity and much that can separate in a Clemente classroom and various aspects of the humanities are laden with depressing facts, but laughter, as a reciprocal act between teacher and students and among students themselves, helped to bridge divides and create a sense of community. As Levine (2007) argues in *Black Culture Black Consciousness*, humor is a social phenomenon, “an interactive process among those who share a sense of commonality of experience and situation” (pp. 358-359). Laughter helps to foster a sense of group cohesion among those within the circle of laughter; through their laughter, they share an experience that those outside the circle aren’t privy to. For African Americans in particular, laughter has been present throughout their history, which is evidence of “communal consciousness and solidarity among a group that too often and too easily has been pictured as persistently and almost totally demoralized and atomized” (p. 359). Although all of the students and staff engaged in laughter at Clemente were not Black, the vast majority were.

Many students talked about how particular classmates “cracked [them] up” and how they appreciated their instructors’ use of humor in the lessons. For example, Duke and Ann-Marie, 2016 graduates, and Bruce, a 2007 graduate, each highlighted how they appreciated the humor of their instructors:

Duke: Professor Carson was *marvelous* in this. I thought that his sense of humor is what carried the day so often for him and for the class. He kept things in perspective. He *never* let this tone of mussy-fussy academia touch us, ever. It was always conversational, always informational, and with a, you know, wry touch to it.

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Bruce: But every class, you’re crying sometimes ‘cause this guy is so funny and just *so* powerful in his passion for writing and words. Just looking at words differently. ... He was like the cool, hip, funny grandfather in every

class you would just look forward to.

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Ann-Marie: He's [professor] so funny in his own little way. ... I don't know, there's just something about him, he's just a sweet person and he talks about his cat!

Likewise, Isabella, a course director who did not teach in the program but sat in on all classes, referenced how she used humor to diffuse tense situations in the classroom:

In the classroom itself, I think I have the ability to kind of, if the atmosphere gets a little bit too dense or if one person talks too much and dominates the conversation, I think that I can use humor and my friendly relationships with the people, sometimes even help our instructor with situations like that. So, because I do have a different kind of relationship with them [students], I can joke around.

Some research even indicates that humor offers the potential to enhance students' affect for the instructor and course (Banas, Dunbar, Rodriguez, & Liu, 2011). In general, appropriate, relevant instructor humor benefits both educators and students (Banas et al., 2011). Extant research indicates students report greater affective learning (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999), more satisfying teacher-student relationships (Welker, 1977), improved learning comprehension (Gorham & Christophel, 1990), and group cohesion (Banas et al., 2011) when they perceive their instructors as appropriately humorous in the classroom.

This positive influence on students may stem from humor's ability to entertain, alleviate anxiety, create a positive learning climate, and boost student motivation (Banas et al., 2011). Humor is important to instructors as well. According to Banas et al. (2011), the use of humor in the classroom increases positive instructor evaluations, enhances instructor credibility, and heightens student attention. In addition to these benefits, Houser, Cowan, and West (2007) note that humor is positively associated with students' perceptions of instructors' extroversion, sociability, and character.

In *Teaching to Transgress*, hooks (1994) and her colleague Ron Scapp discuss using humor in their classrooms and the widespread assumption among academics that learning and laughter are mutually exclusive.

bh: I've actually had colleagues say to me, "Students seem to really enjoy your class. What are you doing wrong?"

RS: Colleagues say to me, "Your students seem to be enjoying themselves, they seem to be laughing whenever I walk by, you seem to be having a good time." And the implication is that you're a good joke-teller, you're a good performer, but no serious teaching is happening. Pleasure in the classroom is feared. ... It is not assumed that your ideas can be entertaining, moving. To prove your academic seriousness, students should be almost dead, quiet, asleep, not up, excited, and buzzing, lingering around the classroom. (p. 145)

As a participant observer, I experienced far more humor and laughter in a Clemente classroom than I ever did as a student or educator elsewhere. Perhaps this is because the classes take place outside of the hallowed halls of academia, and instructors don't feel pressured to maintain "academic seriousness," as hooks and Scapp suggest, or perhaps it's because most Clemente instructors aren't the type to take things too seriously to begin with. Either way, there are no colleagues, deans, or department chairs to walk by the classroom and question the laughter enveloping the room. Perhaps, too, Clemente students are more apt to laugh because most have not been socialized into what Duke called "mussy-fussy academia."

### **Students' Desire to Continue the Community**

When I asked students what suggestions they could offer Clemente, the most common refrain was that they would like Clemente to offer more alumni-related activities – events,

courses, reunions – so that they could reunite with their classmates. Some had fallen out of touch, moved, and/or never had, or lost, their classmates' contact information. As one 2008 graduate stated, "I wish the alumni would gather closer together in a more unified way. . . . One time I didn't go to the [alumni] picnic, and that one time I really should have. That is such a great opportunity to get strength. I really do wish that the alumni could gather together, oh, I wish that so much." Similarly, as I finished up a phone interview with a 2016 graduate (with whom I spoke when he was still a student), I asked if there was anything else he'd like to add. "I would love to definitely keep in touch, to have some kind of alumni relations, alumni courses, and such," he said. "It will be great just to revisit the students who were with me and just to share all of our experiences actually while we continue to learn new things."

Students' close bonds in the classroom coupled with their desire to maintain contact suggest evidence of social capital. In the past decade, the concept of social capital has gained traction in research and social policy literature across the fields of sociology, anthropology, economics, community development, and education. Concern about the lack of social cohesion in some communities has arguably contributed to interest in the concept (e.g., Putnam, 1995; 2000). Terminology such as "bonding ties" (interactions between members of a group that build and maintain cohesion) and "bridging ties" (interactions external to the group) has entered the discourse around social capital in an attempt to better define and comprehend it (Gittell & Vidal, 1998). Clemente students appear to form bonding ties with one another, while their ties to faculty and staff, who can provide them letters of reference, are bridging.

According to Balatti and Falk (2002), building and activating social capital are outcomes of learning as well as the processes by which learning actually occurs. For students to develop social capital in the classroom, they must interact in potentially new ways, in new contexts, and

with new people – all of which seem to be at play in most Clemente classrooms. Alfred (2009) argues that building a classroom community that emphasizes common rules and norms, respect, and collaboration can help students build social networks that benefit them in both psychological and instrumental ways. Indeed, this is what so many Clemente classrooms do.

Course directors concede that alumni relations can be a challenge, often a significant one; the Clemente population can be highly mobile and difficult to maintain contact with. What's more, Clemente courses often do not have the necessary resources to develop robust alumni programs. As Manuel, the director of an organization responsible for financial and administrative support for its state's Clemente courses, said:

A big challenge for us is what do we do with alumni? We don't have the resources. Or rather we've spent the resources on creating more courses rather than, like, having an alumni coordinator. So, keeping track of alumni is really hard, but we want to continue to offer opportunities for engagement in the humanities. So, the alumni part can be pretty challenging.

Many others echoed the idea of wanting more time with their classmates, though instead of alumni activities, they suggested longer class times. When I asked students if they had any suggestions for the course, I heard “longer classes,” “more classes,” and “another year” so often that I grew to expect hearing it – from 50 of 76 interviewees. As Sheree, a 2013 graduate, suggested:

I just want it to be longer, just to be a little longer, and I wish they had more days. I wish they had more days because I just was so in love with my group and my classmates and the teachers, and we only was there for like three hours [per evening]. ... I just wish I had more time to read, I wish I had more time to think about it, and like figure out what they [writers] were doing at that time and why they wrote the books. Trying to figure out what they meant by this sentence in that book or how they must have felt. ... Like, I wish I had more time to dive deeper into those subjects because it was such a deep and enriching topic. That was like, we would leave class late because we just didn't want to stop talking about it. Then the professor would be, “You *do* have to leave at some point!” [laughs]

And Kiki, a 2015 graduate, similarly suggested that classes run longer. She found the dialogue

so stimulating that she often wanted to stay later:

I was never ready to leave at 8, you know what I'm saying? Just the dialogue that was going. I was never ready to leave at 8. So, it can go to 9. I wasn't ready, but people who have jobs, other things, they may have more obligations, but I wasn't ready to leave.

## **Conclusion**

It is possible to foster community among an incredibly diverse array of students, many of whom have not had a positive educational experience in their lives, but it's not possible to foster this kind of community when educators ignore the realities or habitus in which adult students are embedded. Student-centered education, focused on what Wojecki (2007) calls "the student's life worlds, communities, aspirations, and experiences" is important in fostering community among marginalized learners but requires moving away from the banking method of education in favor of a more Socratic, problem-posing form of education (p. 170). It requires educators to appear to engage with adult learners in a *horizontal* relationship.

As Wojecki (2007) advised, "It becomes crucial for adult educators to become curious and interested in learners' stories, in particular the previous stories which shape their current self-making and identity construction" (p. 171). In short, to foster community among diverse adult learners, it requires more from educators than simply preparing and delivering a lesson and offering office hours each week, as one might in a typical university setting. MacKeracher et al. (2006) pointed out the importance of "responsive educational systems" that recognize the unique needs of adult learners and are "supportive of adult learners by helping them to ameliorate barriers to learning" (p. 22).

I'd like to end with an excerpt from an interview with Bruce, who graduated from Clemente nine years ago and, when we spoke, was "two Spanish classes" away from completing his bachelor's degree in social work. His words illustrate what Clemente does to build

community, why it's meaningful to participants, and how very different that experience is from a traditional college experience.

To sit in the room with 30 other people and learn in that way was just revolutionary on my mind. I always tell my friends it's the most powerful education experience. To me it's what education should look like where you sit in a circle with your peers. You glean information and knowledge from your peers rather than someone who just read the book first. ... There is no comparison [of Clemente vs. a university experience]. So, the University has these, you know, rigid standards or whatever, they would say for accreditation or whatever. But they don't really look at *individuals*. [At Clemente], you're in a room with 30 people and they're keeping it real, they're validated to speak, their voices are very important. But, unfortunately, in the reality we live in – and I guess I'm a little jaded – it's more about making money and other considerations rather than holistically educating individuals, meeting them where they're at, and helping them.

## CHAPTER 6: Citizenship

It has been argued that liberal education plays a special role in producing democratic citizens, the kind of citizens who can keep democracy alive and help it flourish (Nussbaum, 2010). In its earliest days, a “liberal” education referred not only to a range of subjects, but also to a “moral and intellectual training which was restricted to those who were ... legally free (*liber*) and enjoyed the status of citizens (*cives*)” (Christinidis & Ellis, 2013, p. 67). In ancient times, knowledge and education were seen as tools for shaping well-rounded individuals as well as the institution of citizenship for the creation of a well-rounded, thoughtful society (Christinidis & Ellis, 2013). On the unique importance of a liberal education, Lavery (2015) argues:

The humanities educate us to think for ourselves and enable us to pursue autonomy. They do this by cultivating independent or critical thinking accompanied by resistance to conformity, authority, and manipulation. The humanities involve the formulation, analysis, and evaluation of arguments, practices that trace their roots back to Socrates. (p. 635)

A primary aim of this dissertation was to examine the relationship between students’ participation in the Clemente course and their engagement as democratic citizens. Was there any association, I wondered, between course participation and students’ critical thinking skills and engagement in their own lives and community? Did students and faculty see the course as a way to make students become “better” citizens? If, as Bérubé (2006) suggests, the humanities “teach people to think deeply and reflectively about the good life, the good society and the idea of the good,” then Clemente holds the potential to bring about transformative change (p. 295). My research indicates that most students in the sample felt that the education in the humanities that they received in Clemente helped them to more fully participate in society as democratic

citizens. Students most often spoke of learning to thinking more critically, gaining confidence in speaking and writing, engaging more actively in their communities, and taking control over their futures – all of which contribute to a healthy, deliberative democracy.

### **Critical Thinking**

The critical thinking tradition concerns itself mostly with what Burbules and Berk (1999) call “epistemic adequacy” (p. 46). To be “critical” requires one to “be more discerning in recognizing faulty arguments, hasty generalizations, assertions lacking evidence, truth claims based on unreliable authority, ambiguous or obscure concepts, and so forth” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 46). Humans have thought about critical thinking and how to teach it for thousands of years – since Socrates, if not before (Fisher, 2011). John Dewey, the American philosopher and educator, is widely regarded as the “father” of the modern critical thinking tradition. Dewey (1909) termed it “reflective thinking” and defined it as: “Active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds which support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). By defining critical thinking as an active process, Dewey contrasted it with a passive form of thinking in which one receives ideas and information from someone else – what Freire calls “banking education.” Since Dewey, myriad definitions of critical thinking have sprung up. Edward Glaser (1941), co-author of the world’s most widely used test of critical thinking, the Watson-Glaser Critical Thinking Appraisal, built on Dewey’s ideas to define critical thinking as:

- (1) an attitude of being disposed to consider in a thoughtful way the problems and subjects that come within the range of one’s experience; (2) knowledge of the methods of logical enquiry and reasoning; and (3) some skill in applying those methods. Critical thinking calls for a persistent effort to examine any belief or supposed form of knowledge

in the light of the evidence that supports it and the further conclusions to which it tends.  
(p. 5)

Nussbaum defines critical thinking as the ability “to examine, reflect, argue, and debate, deferring to neither tradition nor authority,” and argues that when pursued within the context of the humanities, critical thinking contributes to both the creation of goals that can be pursued systematically and a culture of innovation (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 25). While differences exist as to how critical thinking should be taught – whether through subject-specific content or as a set of generalizable skills – there is little disagreement over the purpose of fostering such skills. Brown (1998), McPeck (1990), Nussbaum (1997; 2004), Paul (1993), and Siegel (1988; 1997), among others, have argued that an education in critical thinking is the only education that can truly prepare individuals for democratic participation.

Nussbaum (2010) contends that Socratic pedagogy – critical thinking – cultivates good citizens:

One of the reasons people have insisted on giving all undergraduates a set of courses in philosophy and other subjects in the humanities is that they believe such courses, through both content and pedagogy, will stimulate students to think and argue for themselves ... and they believe that the ability to argue in this Socratic way is, as Socrates proclaimed, valuable for democracy. (p. 48)

On a practical level, this takes the form of students learning to probe, evaluating evidence, writing papers with well-structured arguments, and analyzing the arguments presented to them in discussion and texts. Philosophy classes in particular give full immersion in Socratic thinking and, Nussbaum (2010) argues, some texts provide a particularly good “jumping-off” point: “the dialogues of Plato are second to none for their capacity to inspire searching, active thinking, with

the life and example of Socrates up front to inspire” (p. 55). Indeed, Plato’s Allegory of the Cave, a dialogue between Plato’s brother Glaucon and Socrates, was repeatedly mentioned by students as a particularly impactful text and was the single most-cited work by students. Across the 76 interviews conducted with students and graduates, “Plato” was mentioned 50 times, the “cave” 46 times, and “Socrates” 35 times – more than any other course material. In the allegory, Plato (350 BCE) paints a picture of ordinary people imprisoned in a cave, unaware of the true reality hidden from them:

Behold, human beings living in an underground den ... here they have been from their childhood, and have their legs and necks chained so that they cannot move ... and they see only their own shadows, or the shadows of one another, which the fire throws on the opposite wall of the cave... To them, the truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images. (n.p.)

When a prisoner is released from the cave, she initially suffers from the sun’s blinding brightness, but as her eyes adjust she begins to see the truth. If she were to return to the cave to enlighten the captives, they likely wouldn’t believe her, because they couldn’t imagine a world beyond the underground. Shorris, Clemente’s founder, recounts that he included the Allegory of the Cave in the pilot course’s curriculum at the urging of Bedford Hills Correctional Facility inmate Niece Walker, whom Shorris interviewed as part of his research on the causes of poverty and who served as inspiration for the course. While incarcerated, Walker pursued a college degree with a concentration in philosophy (Shorris, 2000). When Shorris reviewed the proposed curriculum for the pilot Clemente course with Walker, she argued that there was “something missing ... The Allegory of the Cave. How can you teach philosophy to poor people without the Allegory of the Cave? The ghetto is the cave. Education is the light. Poor people can

understand that” (Shorris, 2000, p. 136). Similarly, a Clemente staff person who had known Earl Shorris commented that across Clemente courses – including ones in Mayan communities in Mexico, in Darfur, and, of course, the US – “the only common element is all the students make a lot of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave.” Indeed, many of the students with whom I spoke agreed with Walker. They saw themselves as the cave’s prisoners and believed they had been living in a form of darkness until Clemente.

Alejandra graduated from Clemente in 2007. With a nearly a decade between her and the course material, she struggled to recall the exact names of texts and their authors when we spoke, but when I asked her what she recalled as being most impactful, she immediately remembered the cave:

Alejandra: Up to that point I didn’t have really any education. . . . So, all of it was kind of, wow, this is brand new. I didn’t even know that type of knowledge existed. There was a particular thing that we were learning about, I’m sorry, I’m just, like, closing my eyes trying to remember what it was. It was like something like the Odyssey of the Cave, I think it was, where you have these people chained in a cave looking at a wall, and there’s a light. They don’t know that they’ve never experienced what it was like outside the cave.

Charity: Yeah, that’s Plato.

Alejandra: Yeah, that’s how I felt at that moment. I wasn’t a real *citizen*, I was just *existing*. I had no education, no real goals, didn’t know where to go, didn’t know how to start, didn’t know how I was going to finish.

Tameka, who graduated in 2009, also recalled how the allegory “spoke to” her and ultimately encouraged her to take a more active role in society:

The story itself was, you kind of can relate that, you can relate to it. Because it happens all the time, you just, you can actually put that storyline into your real life every day – the certain situations that you deal with, especially being an intercity kid, growing up in poverty and areas of that nature. It kind of brought a lot of light to me and boosted me to get out there and do something.

Estelle and Florence, 2012 and 2015 graduates respectively, also related to the cave personally,

while Kiki, a 2015 graduate, related it more broadly to the Black community:

Estelle:       Actually, it was when we talked about, I think it was Plato, or maybe it was Socrates, about the cave, and it just, like, addressed how everybody could be in a cave. Everybody is in a cave. Everybody has to get out of that cave but when you're in that cave, you don't realize that you're actually in that cave. The stuff that's going on around you can lead you to the exit, but you're still afraid of leaving that comfortable spot. You don't realize that you're comfortable in your cave. So, that kind of spoke to me. ... It was like you're talking about my life now. ... It was like, *wow!*

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Kiki:           The cave. When they [prisoners] were in the cave, it made me think about how even in the Black community how, even though we're not *literally* in the cave, we're living in the cave in that you think it's reality where you're at, but it's just a version or a shade. But people are living life thinking that this is all there is. I was able to correlate that to life and what's really going on, what I've seen, and what's happening.

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Florence:      The Allegory of the Cave hit me so hard. I was like, "Oh my God, how did I not read this 40 years ago?!" But then again, maybe 40 years ago I wouldn't have been ready. In the cave, they were chained up, not being able to see, and some rejected the light, rejected the truth. And I realized that was like the teachers trying to bring us to the light. Some [students] would reject it and some would accept it. It was just awesome.

Aurora, a 2004 graduate, also found the allegory to be the single most impactful text of the course. She felt that the Clemente experience had "dragged [her] out of the cave," and exposure to the humanities gave her a sense of "belonging" and a desire to "give back" to her community:

Of course, the critical thinking [was impactful], and that part was excellent. But more so it's when I read the Allegory of the Cave, which really made me fall in love with the courses especially then because it was my life, I thought. Because I felt like I was, at first you're in a cave accepting, you know, the images on the wall from the shadows. My friend Dori [who recommended the course] had dragged me out of the cave, pretty much to see the truth about the images. So, I believe that everybody needs to have that kind of experience. Even if you've had the highest level of education, you can still have a cave life. ... It was eye-opening to me and it gave me a sense of belonging once I began to read the books, you know, the great literary works, and it was just awesome. And it gave me a sense to want to give back and do the same for other people, especially people in my community and the children. Well, for my kids, I mean, I pushed them and pushed

them from that [Clemente experience]. I just knew they needed to be educated, they needed to experience life in a different community, a different state, different cities, just to have different experiences so they'll know that this is not all life is about, that there's more.

To a purist, these graduates' reading of the Allegory could be viewed as "wrong." Plato argued that the cave is, in fact, the entire world, not simply an *aspect* of the world. But what is most important is not students' interpretation of the cave or of any given text but, rather, the fact that they're interpreting texts at all. Wrestling with complicated readings is what builds students' confidence and critical thinking skills, spurs them to ask questions and reflect on their lives and those of others, and ultimately contributes to their citizenship. As one graduate stated, "Those readings, like the Cave, they just made me think in a different way. I'm not afraid to think now. ... I know I've got something to contribute to this world." The Allegory of the Cave is just one example of a text that encouraged students to think deeply, ask questions, and reflect on their own lives and the lives of those around them – all of which contribute to good citizenship.

Seventy-one of the 76 students indicated that their thinking had changed because of Clemente. Responses included: "I think wider now"; "I stop and I really *reflect* before I make a decision, I do"; "I ask 'Why?', like, all the time now"; and "I'm not on autopilot when it comes to thinking anymore." Indeed, these responses indicate that students were actively engaged in critical thinking outside of Clemente, which, Dewey (1910) argues, acts as a corrective to snap judgements – it "affords the sole method of escape from purely impulsive or purely routine action" (p. 14). And when students said they asked more questions as a result of Clemente, it recalls Dewey's (1910) argument that the critical thinker must exercise doubt:

To turn the thing over in mind, to reflect, means to hunt for additional evidence, for new data, that will develop the suggestion, and will either, as we say, bear it out or else make

obvious its absurdity and irrelevance. ... Reflective thinking ... involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance. Reflective thinking, in short, means judgment suspended during further inquiry. ... To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry – these are the essentials of thinking. (p. 13)

Darnell, for example, dropped out the course about half-way through but felt that it expanded his thinking during the short period of time he was there:

Darnell: It was just a small time I was there. ... I was learning information, and the little information that I did get, it just really made me start, I started thinking on a whole different level, you know what I'm saying? So, I just, like, want more of that. ... So, I mean definitely it made me think more. Some things I do every day, I did different after I started going to the Clemente classes.

Charity: Really?

Darnell: Yes, I mean, looking at things different, from the information that I got. I mean, you kind of feel like you know what's going on now, the origin of everything, how people are thinking. It just put it in perspective for me. So, I can imagine what would happen if I just, like, had the whole package.

Luisa, Tiana, Yesenia, and Ivory similarly stressed that they felt more “open-minded” and saw things “differently” after Clemente:

Luisa: I know more things that I didn't know. I think before I act, more so than I did before. ... But not only do I think, but I relate the philosophy lessons that were taught to me to what I'm doing in my life – just to make sure I'm making better decisions. ... I find myself more tolerant, you know, more open-minded, like I'm looking at life with a little more, with a little more hope.

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Tiana: I do [feel more open-minded]. It makes me, you know, when I just judge people based on what I see or the first things out they mouth – I don't do

that anymore. I don't do that anymore. ... Even now when I see things on TV, I find myself saying, "Now what would Socrates say?" ... So, I find myself saying that and looking at things and saying, "Hmm." So, to me it's making me think outside the box. I'm not taking things for face value or just what you see. Like when the media is blowing up something, [I think], "What else are you hiding?" instead of just saying, "Oh, that's a shame. It is what it is." ... Before [Clemente], if the news said it, that's what it is.

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Yesenia: I'm more aware, I try to do things with an open mind, try to consider always looking for things that I cannot see. I always ask [questions] and rethink other points of view. I do that more often than before.

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Ivory: I do a lot of research now. I see things differently, I see that things are *constructed*. Things are constructed socially, economically, politically, and *how* things are constructed.

DeeDee, a 2012 graduate in her fifties, underscored how important she thought critical thinking was for the adult learner because, she argued, "a lot of people don't think beyond" – meaning, a lot of people don't "think beyond" what they're told is true or right:

DeeDee: The critical thinking piece is really important to be able to discern certain things, and that's something I don't think everyone talks about. But I think that's really important for an adult, an adult learner, the critical thinking piece. A lot of people just don't think beyond.

Charity: Do you mean in reference to current events or politics or really just across the board?

DeeDee: Across the board. Whether it's literature that you're reading – and certainly the literature course enforced that because you're interpreting poetry, you're interpreting literature, what it could have meant back then, and how it relates even now to everyday life. You're interpreting art. And it's just the history and of course the philosophy. I mean it's like, "Let's just go have late night coffee and talk about it all." So, they're [Clemente] bringing all of those things to you to think about. It's really huge.

**Close Reading.** Critical thinking doesn't just happen, however. Students have to be *taught* how to do it. In Clemente, this largely takes the form of problem-posing instruction. But

in addition to Socratic pedagogy, students repeatedly highlighted two strategies that they thought enhanced their critical thinking skills: close reading and visual, or formal, analysis. Close reading refers to literacy practices devoted to methodical interpretation of texts (Rabinowitz, 1992). It involves sustained analyses, with students reading and rereading to obtain thorough understandings of the text at hand. Because Clemente enrolls students with a range of educational histories, no matter what text is chosen, students will be at different levels of comprehension. Clemente professors used the close reading strategy to help the students gain more knowledge of text structure, to determine what's important, and to understand the author's purpose. In her book *Our Declaration* (2014), Danielle Allen, who taught in Clemente for ten years, writes, "Yet if you had peeked in on us, what would you have seen? By and large all we were doing was reading texts closely, and discussing them. We scrutinized single words" (p. 32). For example, her class did a close reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* and interrogated the word "autonomy," asking "What does it mean? Is Antigone's autonomy a good or bad thing?" and they probed cryptic Shakespearean sonnets (p. 32). Indeed, close reading was a regular occurrence at both sites I observed; the strategy was used not only in literature class, but in every class where students were assigned a potentially difficult text. In a philosophy class, for example, students were assigned a portion of Kant's (1785) *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. My field notes from that evening's class show that students began to struggle – and rightfully so – when they reached Kant's idea of a "categorical imperative":

Professor Carson stops the class. "You know," he says, "we haven't done a close reading of this section yet. So, let's try that. Everyone reads one sentence, and we don't move on to the next sentence until everyone understands." Ann-Marie reads a sentence – "I ought never to act except in such a way that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law." When she's finished, Jimena says to Carson, "This dude [Kant] make me wanna go back to school to learn how to *read*!" Carson explains that it's hard, and even at the university where he teaches, "we do it this way, we go line by line." "Close readings in the group help me when we do it in class," Lenore says. "Otherwise I

have to read and re-read and sometimes read aloud” to understand.

“Me too,” Evie agrees. “I have to come to class, to hear it and hear other people talk about it.”

In another instance, the class was reading Shakespeare’s *King Lear*. My field notes reveal what a typical close reading of a scene might look like:

Ruby, the literature instructor, assigns parts: Ivory will be Goneril, Tiana will be Regan, and Ruby will read King Lear’s part.

Ivory reads as Goneril:

*“Hear me, my lord.  
What need you five and twenty, ten, or five  
To follow in a house where twice so many  
Have a command to tend you?”*

“Great, thank you,” Ruby says. “The first thing with a close reading is to translate it and figure out what’s going on.”

Iris volunteers. “It sounds like Goneril is asking why do you need so many to attend you?”

“Right,” Tiana agrees. “Why you need all these knights when you stay with twice that many at home?”

Tiana reads Regan’s part, which is just one line:

*“What need one?”*

“What need one?” Ruby repeats. “What do we think that means?”

“Why do you even need one?” Rico volunteers.

“Good,” Ruth says, and she picks up reading as King Lear:

*“...Touch me with noble anger.  
And let not women’s weapons, water drops,  
Stain my man’s cheeks! No, you unnatural hags  
I will have such revenges on you both  
That all the world shall – I will do such things –  
What they are yet I know not, but they shall be  
The terrors of the earth. You think I’ll weep?  
No, I’ll not weep.”*

When Ruby finishes reading, Iris says, “I hear fury. He’s furious.”

Ruby asks Ivory, “Do you hear fury?”

“Yeah,” Ivory says tentatively.

Ruby reads the line again:

*“And let not women’s weapons, water drops,  
Stain my man’s cheeks! No, you unnatural hags  
I will have such revenges on you both.”*

“Why is he furious?” Ruby asks.

Ivory offers her interpretation: “He’s so consumed with anger and embarrassment that these wretched hags turned on him.”

Rico adds, “He wants to fend off weakness or the perception of weakness.”

Stephanie says she has a question: “I’m wondering if Lear realizes he gave up his crown

and he's not just mad at them, but he's mad at himself?"

"What made you feel like that?" Ruby asks.

"Maybe he's just realizing as he's talking, and that's why he's not finishing sentences," Stephanie offers.

"OK," Ruby says, "let's hear what others think about that."

As one would expect with line by line reading, it takes a while to get through any given text and, as an observer, it sometimes felt like a laborious process. Most students, however, seemed to value the experience and felt that it was a useful strategy that not only helped them to comprehend the text, but also to think more analytically:

Tiana: Yeah, I've never taken a paragraph and just dissected it, so that was a first for me. ... What I thought I read from a paragraph, somebody else may tell me, "Well, no, I read this," and then I'm able to see their side of what they thought. So, I thought that was a good thing. I mean, you know, we do that in [elementary] school now, but we've never done it to that extent, which I think it's needed ... in all the grades.

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Duke: I have to say that critical thinking was something that I came to class to learn how to do better as far as reading. Critical analysis was something I really wanted to work on as well. They [Clemente] kind of helped to give me some tools for breaking down a piece of writing and finding information.

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Stephanie: I enjoyed that. ... I saw where everybody was coming from, so I enjoyed that. The investigation behind it, that's what I enjoyed about the close reading. It's because it's like an investigation. It's like, what are we really talking about here, right? What are we *really* talking about?

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Janelle: I think it's fundamental. ... to read stuff very closely and discuss it so that you really look into things, you can read things and just not assume that there's one meaning to anything. That, to me, is really important. Because it helped too, like even when I read something outside of class. Like there's two sides of the Bible. Of course you go to church, you go to Sunday school or whatever, and you're taught there's only one way to interpret it, but then look at it as a piece of *literature*, do a little close reading, and then you see it differently.

There was one dissenter, however. Rico, a 2015 graduate who was simultaneously enrolled in Clemente and a master's degree program, thought the close reading exercises were "unproductive":

I understood her [literature professor] intention and her intentionality. I got it. But, it just got too [much], we don't need to go over this sentence four times, like, we just need to keep reading. The point that I'm trying to make is that if we are going to take a book that's ... difficult to kind of absorb and then want to go back and do a close reading of something, well, what about the rest of the entire book? ... I think it's just kind of unproductive.

It's important to mention Rico as a negative case but it is equally important to reiterate that he was not a typical Clemente student, as he entered with a bachelor's degree and graduated from his master's program at the same time he graduated from Clemente. He likely had more experience with dense academic texts than his peers and seemed to enter the course with more finely honed critical thinking skills.

**Visual Analysis.** In addition to close reading, students engaged in visual analyses (also known as formal analyses) in their art history classes. Like close reading, a visual analysis is an exercise in close observation – in this case, observation of the formal characteristics of an art work. Students were asked to describe only what they *saw* in the projected images, no feelings or speculation, and this was a point that took several classes for the students to fully grasp. My field notes from an art history class demonstrate how one of the students' first visual analyses played out:

A picture of Khafre (2570 BCE) is projected onto the screen.

"We need to exercise your formal analytical skills," Aaron, the instructor, says.

"Eliminate everything you cannot see. How would we develop a formal analysis of this?"

Luisa: "The first thing *I* see is that well-toned, muscled body." Lots of laughter.

"I see strength," Ann-Marie says.

"I don't think he was a very productive being," Maya interjects. "I think he sat a lot."

Aaron points at the image. "I'm gonna stop you guys right here. Maya, now you've

trespassed,” he says. “Can you see that *empirically*?”

“No,” Maya says.

“He emulates royalty,” Al says.

“Same thing,” Aaron says, meaning Al’s response, like Maya’s, is based on opinion, not something that can be seen.

“I’m not finished,” Al continues. “His head gear –” But Al is interrupted by Lorraine, who says, “He exudes power. He’s somebody who’s important.” Al rolls his eyes.

“OK, OK,” Aaron sighs. Some students laugh. “I want to stick to what we can *see*.”

“He has a beard,” Luisa says. “He’s smiling,” Carla adds. “He has wisdom,” Gloria says. Someone says to Gloria, “No, you’re guessing.” Gloria laughs and says, “OK, let’s do it again!”

Aaron writes *a priori* on the chart paper at the front of the room. He explains that it’s knowledge you know before this moment, that you come to a situation knowing, and *a posteriori*, which he writes, is knowledge that is *acquired*. Students write these down.

“I would like to avoid using any *a priori* knowledge,” Aaron tells the class.

“OK,” Gloria says.

“Wisdom, power, those are things we’re bringing from our lived experience,” Aaron explains.

“Gotcha,” Gloria says, nodding her head.

Luciana is reaching her hand straight into the air, like she’s excited to be called on: “I see one of his hands is balled in a fist.”

“Excellent!” Aaron says as he points to her. Luciana smiles and says, “Thank you!”

“It seems to me that he’s an ethnic man,” Jimena says. “He’s a Black man.”

“Oh, that’s a transgression,” Aaron says, shaking his head from side to side. “You’re imposing ethnicity on him. . . . You’re making an *a priori* assumption that there is such a thing as Black features. We can be led to believe it because of the material, but it’s incorrect to assume the material was chosen for that reason. We’ll see this in a few weeks when we go to the museum” to which the students enthusiastically cheer, “Yaaay!” like excited children anticipating a fieldtrip.

Like the close readings, the visual analyses could be long, drawn-out affairs, particularly in the beginning of the course when students were unsure what was being asked of them. Sometimes these analyses took so long that the class would only get through a handful of slides in an evening. What value did students see in this strategy? I found that, in interviews, I rarely had to ask about the visual analyses because students mentioned them on their own. They felt that the strategy helped them to think more analytically and objectively and prompted them to “look at things on a grander scale”:

Ann-Marie: You could take that visual analysis not just to art. I feel you could take that in everyday life or even to analyze a situation. You’re able to take out the

bias. I think it's very useful.

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Jimena: I think I became a critical thinker type of a person who can look at both side of the fence. You know, look at people, look at things from more than one side. ... You learn to be analytical.

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Janelle: It's really the only way to get people out of being opinionated about something before they've broken it down and looked at it. So, I could see the real need to really make that a fundamental skill or requirement, just to be forcing you to be more objective, forcing you not to just say, "I don't like it," or "It's nice," or whatever. It forces you to just kind of break down the components and look at it. It's supposed to be sort of just an analysis of what you see. That analysis allows you to more clearly clarify when you get to the more subjective stuff.

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Luciana: I think for myself personally, it [visual analysis] kind of like, you know when something, like, broadens your horizons? ... Like, you look at things on a grander scale. Things are a lot bigger than what we actually see. It makes me think along those lines.

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Luisa: I think that's [visual analysis] not only helpful but, it's mentally important because being able to see what you're looking at in a complete way is the skill that most of us really don't have. We're always rushing through life. So, we look at things and we see the superficial and we keep it moving. But he [professor] made us stop, go really slow – something like when they say, "Stop and smell the roses." He made us stop and ... that was good, and that's something I'm doing now.

Several students remarked that it made them look more closely at, and appreciate the beauty of, the world around them. For instance:

Adelaide: I think I became more aware of my surroundings. Like when I walk in the city, I look up. I'm trying to give an analysis, like, "Oh my God, what kind of column is this?" The different colors, the different buildings, the art in it, the beauty in it. ... So, I'm trying to really stop to observe and recognize the beauty. Now I can actually look, recognize, and I may be able to point out certain things. I know the history of it. As opposed to just

walking by every day, nonchalantly, and having no idea. Yeah, it was really great.

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Roger: Me, I'm a [city] guy, I'm a native [city] guy. You know when we did our walking tour and he [professor] had us looking up? In [city], we don't look up, that's something that we don't do. Our heads are down, either in our phones or we just fast pacing to get to where we need to go. He made you actually start thinking about stopping and smelling the roses, *literally*. It [visual analysis] had you look at things, not for just what you see visually but it made you start to think a little bit more about the time period and what it came from and what materials they had to create the sculptures and things of that nature.

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Tisha: Now when, even when I drive around, I look at buildings, I look at steps, I look at, you know, hand railings. Like just wherever I go, I kind of have a greater appreciation for architecture, ... because you are exposed to so much – so many varieties, so many different buildings. ... It really makes you think about where it came from, who thought of it, you know what I mean?

The overwhelmingly positive response to the visual analyses prompted me reflect on the frustration I occasionally felt as a participant observer during the sometimes protracted exercises. I surmised that the slowness and deliberative contemplation associated with the exercise was precisely what students *liked*. Rarely was there space in their lives for such uninterrupted thinking. This recalls Dewey's (1910) point about critical thinking from his masterwork, *How We Think*:

Sometimes slowness and depth of response are intimately connected. Time is required in order to digest impressions, and translate them into substantial ideas. "Brightness" may be but a flash in the pan. The "slow but sure" person ... is one in whom impressions sink and accumulate, so that thinking is done at a deeper level of value than with a slighter load... The depth to which a sense of the problem, of the difficulty, sinks, determines the

quality of the thinking that follows. (p. 38)

Only one student remarked on the often lengthy nature of the visual analyses: “Every freaking picture became a soap opera almost,” Jimena said. “They [classmates] would have to add some kind of extra explanation to it [art work]. I didn’t get that part of other people, how other people had to put their interpretation in there, and I promise you, I had little tolerance for it.” Despite her frustration with her classmates, Jimena still had positive things to say about the technique, remarking that it helped her become “a critical thinker type of person.” Taken together, close readings and visual analyses greatly contributed to students’ critical thinking skills, and while students initially struggled with the visual analyses, they came to find value in them. van der Ploeg (2016) argues that democracy cannot exist without deliberation, reflection, and insight, which is the main reason why Dewey believed that democracy went hand in hand with education. It was clear from class observations and interviews that close readings and visual analyses encouraged students to think more deeply, to deliberate, and to reflect – all of which make for strong democratic citizens.

### **Confidence**

Self-confidence was a recurring theme in student and staff interviews and is an important trait of engaged citizens in a deliberative democracy. Seventy of the 76 students interviewed remarked that they left the Clemente experience feeling more confident in themselves generally and/or in their reading, writing, and speaking abilities specifically. Most (85%) course directors and instructors stated that they strove to develop students’ confidence, and for several directors, they considered it to be an important “goal” of the course, as non-traditional students tend to enter higher education with a lack of confidence (Kimborough & Weaver, 1999).

Cody, a 2006 graduate, explained that he entered the course lacking confidence in his

writing and public speaking abilities. He said his experience in Clemente gave him the confidence to pursue a career as a police officer:

It helped to give me confidence in writing, from learning those basics, it did a lot actually. I'm a police officer now in [city]. I think that, for the most part, the confidence to believe in myself to be a good writer and a good communicator came from the course. So, being able to fill out the application that includes an essay as well as interview really good – a lot of those skills came from Clemente. One of the things that we did in Clemente was the Shakespeare. We had to act it out, so we got, like, speaking lessons, how to be a good orator, stuff like that. So, all of those things really just helped me prepare for the interview process. I was competing against 1,200 applicants for 20 positions, and I didn't have the history in it. Yeah, I didn't have anything. I had a high school diploma. ... So, that level of competition for a job in a predominantly white city in a predominantly white police department but then still being confident within myself, that came from my experience in Clemente.

Estelle felt that she had relatively strong reading and writing skills coming into Clemente but lacked confidence:

I was a strong reader and writer going into Clemente, but I was not confident, because I did not go straight from high school to college. So, I thought the little stuff I write, it's going to be nothing compared to what they're [professors] used to. I'm sure these people have seen geniuses and that kind of stuff. It was like a big thing, you know, that they would even entertain just little me. It was like, *wow*. It allowed me to have the confidence, because just getting into the program was like, "Oh my God, I got in!" She [course director] really cares what I think. Well, let me say it gave me confidence in myself, that my voice could be heard and counted. ... I'm actually a voice.

Al similarly lacked confidence in his writing abilities but found that they had improved – more than he initially realized – through Clemente:

I got a compliment not too long ago from my program director [at work] who said at a big meeting that, "I'll have Al write it up, because he's a good writer." When she said that, I wanted to blush and hide, because I always thought, like, I'm a horrible writer. I wasn't terrible, but I just wasn't on the level of someone who would ever be considered a good writer. So, then I credit him [Clemente literature professor] for that, and I credit that class for that.

Arnaud immigrated from West Africa and, since graduating from Clemente in 2000, earned his PhD in mechanical engineering. He, too, said he entered with a lack of self-esteem, but Clemente provided an environment where everyone could express themselves without judgment:

Yeah, it's demanding. So, when you go through that it gives you some confidence because since you learned how to write, to read, to communicate, to present – this is really powerful and the presentation aspect is very important. Sometimes you don't want to speak, because you think that people will not like your ideas and so on. But I think Clemente gave us the opportunity, each one of us could express himself. The idea can be wrong or right, but it's good to give your opinion. So, it was a very good setting for students to be confident and to be ready to create, to participate, to be involved.

Khadijah, a 42-year-old graduate of Clemente in 2015, explained that at one point in her life she lacked so much confidence in herself that she resorted to paying \$150 for a fake GED certificate online. She felt that Clemente helped build her self-esteem, and she argued that instilling confidence through education was the key to interrupting oppression:

I think this [Clemente] is building confidence. What people don't give a lot of attention to is confidence: Do you have the confidence and do you believe that you can do it? Do you have the people supporting you saying you can do it? I think that really just touches on what is missing in public education, public school, and the schools in general – someone telling you, you know, "You can do this," and "You don't believe this, but let me show you how you can do this," and "You can look at this, this is an example." So, in oppressed communities, if you think about what it is to be oppressed, whether it's at your job, or housing, in your environment, in your relationships, what is stolen in your oppression is your confidence. So, if you can instill confidence through education and knowledge, even in humanities courses, then you solve the problem. You're able to give people, to deliver them out of their oppression through confidence and then you are instilling in them the ability to go forward.

Gloria, a 2016 graduate in her forties whom I often sat beside in class, began the year very quiet, always sitting farthest away from the professor. While she would engage in conversations before class, she said little during class for the first half of the year. At the beginning of the school year, I asked Gloria what her goals were:

Gloria: I expect to improve my writing skills, my vocabulary, and my knowledge for sure. ... I struggle with that lot, I don't have a good vocabulary. ...

Charity: Do you feel comfortable talking in class?

Gloria: Not really, not yet because, like I said, with my vocabulary, I'm not very articulate. So, in other words, I can speak it in my head, but I can't say it the way I wanted to say it.

Charity: Right. What about in small groups, is that any better?

Gloria: I will speak in public, I will, but I got to get up my nerve.

With time, though, Gloria began to volunteer to read aloud and share her ideas. At the end of the year, she told me how her confidence had been affected:

It boosted my confidence a little bit more because I can be a little more articulate now because I have more information, I have more knowledge, and now I know how to retrieve some knowledge, how to research. And I feel like this is just upping my game a little bit more, like I'm stepping it up a little bit more. ... I can have a conversation with just about anybody now. Well, before I was a little bit reluctant because I wasn't articulate, especially with writing. So, I wasn't as articulate as I am now. I'm not great, but I *am* a whole lot better than I was.

Shanté, a 2012 graduate, also entered the class quiet, but an acting class at Clemente changed all that:

When I was in Clemente, ... I was, like, quiet. I wouldn't speak, like I was that person in class where she'd [professor] be like, "Shanté, is there anything you wanna say?" and, like, literally, I think halfway through the program, I did not say anything. Everybody was like, "Come on, Shanté, speak, come on." And then this dude [professor] came in and did this class for us, and, like, he changed my life. Now I'm, like, outspoken. You cannot shut me up no more. ... I feel like my mind is different. Before I was just trying to get by, but being in that class, it just opened up your mind to see there is a lot you can do.

There were several quiet students whom I watched become increasingly confident expressing themselves as the year progressed, but no transformation was more striking to me than Ivory, a married mother of three in her twenties. She was studious from the start. Throughout the year, I made references in my field notes like, "Ivory is steadily writing notes in her notebook," "Ivory is looking in her dictionary," "Ivory is circling something in the reading," but she was painfully shy. During the first three-quarters of the year, she read aloud or answered only if called on but rarely volunteered to speak in class without prompting. As the year progressed, she began to speak more but remained soft-spoken and introverted. Near the end of the year, the course director told the class that they needed a speaker for graduation, and a

classmate jokingly said, “Oh, Ivory’ll do it!” All eyes went to Ivory but rather than saying no, which we expected, she said, “I don’t mind.” On graduation day, Ivory’s three sons and her husband were in the audience, and she gave a beautifully written, thoughtful speech that centered on her quietness and the confidence she’d gained. An excerpt from notes I took at graduation:

Ivory begins by thanking God for “positioning my steps to come across these steps.” She says the year was a “surreal” experience. “For the duration of the class,” she says, “I was almost speechless.” Several of us chuckle in the audience because we know that’s *literally* true. She says she acquired “so many skills,” but the most important thing she gained is “the confidence to stand before you today.” She thanks the course director, the organization that funds the course, the social worker, me – which I’m surprised by – and her classmates, “who took the words out of my mouth when I couldn’t express them.” Laura, the course director, speaks next; she thanks Ivory and says, “It’s really good to have her up here speaking. ... She’s not exaggerating.”

Iris, a classmate of Ivory, even mentioned Ivory’s transformation during our interview.

Iris: I enjoyed the awakening of many of my classmates, their personal awakening and their curiosities. I enjoyed, respected, and appreciated their vulnerability. *Oh my God*, I loved that Ivory just came alive.

Charity: My gosh, to see her give that speech at graduation was so wonderful.

Iris: My God, that was *wonderful*.

I talked to Ivory about a year after graduation and asked if she thought she was any different as a result of Clemente. “It boosted my confidence by allowing me to speak up and speak out,” she said. “Most definitely. I didn’t have the courage to do that before [Clemente].”

Instructors and course directors likewise remarked on the ways in which the course affects students’ confidence, “self-esteem,” “energy,” and “bravery.” In fact, of the 36 staff people in the sample, 25 thought that increased self-confidence was among the course’s biggest impacts:

Leigh: People have a lot more confidence. I think the biggest impact that we see ... is a confidence impact – confidence about succeeding in higher education and just confidence in general, that sense of agency that comes with that. We just hear over and over from people who have been through

the program what a difference it made in their lives.

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Wendy: Well, I think the most important thing is self-confidence, and they prove to themselves that they're just as good as anybody else. That we all, all of us have to make this city the place we desire to live in – those words come from one of our students from last year.

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Heather: We struggled with ways to evaluate the courses, and we struggled because so much is anecdotal. ... But it certainly gave students confidence. We had a number of students talk to us about how they became more engaged, whatever their path was, they became an activist in one way or another in their community. So, there's that, but most of it was just how they, they found their voice. They found their voice, they became very confident in their skills – academically, intellectually.

### **Improving One's Life Direction and Community**

When I asked students if the Clemente experience impacted their education, career, or general life goals in any way, *every* student – 76 of 76, which includes drop-outs – said yes. Students reported that they gained the confidence to change jobs or seek promotions, vote more often, volunteer in the community and/or their child's school, lose weight, leave relationships, even leave churches or religion altogether, but, most often, students in the sample reported that Clemente motivated them to pursue education of some sort. Most of the graduates I spoke with had neither earned a college degree nor were they enrolled in a four-year college. Graduates like Alejandra, who became social worker, and Bruce, who was set to graduate with a bachelor's degree in social work, were rare in the sample. Alejandra recounted how she didn't know what major to pursue after Clemente but was "inspired" to continue her education:

I didn't know what I wanted to do, I just felt inspired to keep going [after Clemente]. So, I just took a bunch of general classes and then I got together with a guidance counselor at the community college, someone that had me do some tests and was like, "You know what? You had scored high in social work. What do you think about social work?" and I didn't know anything about social work and she just kind of explained it to me and I said,

“I think I want to do that.”

I spoke to Bruce, a 2007 graduate, a few months before his college graduation. He remarked that he could not have gotten to that point without Clemente:

So, I’m one year away from getting my master’s and I’m two Spanish classes away from getting my BSW in social work. ... I’m almost there. I mean it’s been a long haul but ... I could never have done that without Clemente.

Most students – about 66% of the sample – were like Tim, a 2011 graduate; Ornella, a 2007 graduate; and Lola, a 2004 graduate – they had achieved *some* education post-Clemente. Tim was in the process of “baby stepping” to a degree, while Ornella and Lola had pursued higher education for a time but stopped before earning a degree:

Tim: Oh, yes, because right after, *right* after graduating, I went right into community college and currently right now I’m pursuing my bachelor’s. I mean, I’ve been baby-stepping this because it’s been a very challenging process. I’m very committed to both, you know, volunteering as well as school, plus I’m a family man with three children, married to my wife for a little more than 20 years now.

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Ornella: Yes, and Rebecca [course director] and I go toe to toe on this one. I still have not completed my degree. There is only algebra. College algebra is really standing in the way of me now getting a degree. I started the algebra classes ... It just became too challenging. ... Now, I’m not struggling with the mental [health] piece at all, but I’m not feeling like going back to school right now. So, I’m not saying I won’t do it. I’ll be 63 years old in August and I’m not saying I won’t do it. I’m actually doing the things that I really love and like. So, again, periodically Rebecca reminds me: “It’s still up there if you want to do it.” So, it’s an option and I haven’t thrown it away, but I may or may not do that.

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Lola: It did, it made me want to do better. It made me want to go back to school, and I actually did for a couple of more years after I graduated from that program. But then I just had some financial things happen, and I lost my job and stuff like that. So, my focus wasn’t in school anymore. So, I kind of drifted out.

For Carol, a 2006 graduate, “life happened” and thwarted her plan to finish college, though she was emphatic in our interview that she would complete her degree:

Oh, definitely, my outlook in life has changed [since Clemente] and even though life happened, I haven’t given up on my goal of obtaining my bachelor’s of arts and then still going forward. It may be at a little slower pace than others, but I’m going to obtain my goal.

More recent graduates routinely said things to the effect of how Clemente “jumpstarted” or “lit a fire” in their minds. They felt like Clemente put them “in the groove” of school and were enthusiastic about moving forward. For example, Roger, a 2016 graduate in his forties, wanted to complete his college degree so that he could make a career change:

It [Clemente] has woken up this sleeping educational piece that had just been dormant for so long because I’ve been working and just going through the motions of doing my job, doing what I gotta do. It has made me really want to continue and finish quickly ... because I want to go on and do something else and get some more education under my belt.

Roger subsequently enrolled in community college the fall after graduating from Clemente and is currently a part-time student.

I interviewed Stephanie during the summer after her Clemente graduation in 2015. When I asked her what her educational goals were, she said:

I’m not sure, I’m just going to see and, even if I never work again, I just still want to go to college, get a degree in political science. I don’t know, I don’t want to throw this out there because I don’t want to jinx myself, but I really want to be able to say, “I’m a political scientist.” ... Even if I never do anything with that degree, I just, I’m going to have the knowledge. I just want to have the knowledge.

When I called her a year later, she had taken the second-year Bridge course and was preparing to embark on college:

I’m just deciding right now what day to go down to the community college [to enroll]. I’m going to start school in the fall. ... I want to major in sociology. At first I was thinking political science, but then I thought if I want to return to work, sociology might give me a broader range of positions. ... I wouldn’t be thinking of this if not for Clemente.

Similarly, Phyllis, a 2015 graduate in her forties, was planning to continue her education by taking advantage of her employer's tuition reimbursement program:

Most definitely, I'm more geared towards furthering my education. We have another program here [at work] where we can either do tuition reimbursement or we can apply for scholarships. So, I think Clemente kind of got me into the groove of staying in class, engaging, keeping up with my work, creating a binder, keeping in check of the syllabus. So, it kind of got me into a motion of being in class while working.

For Sheree, a 2013 graduate who took the course at age 18, the course proved to her that the humanities were a field she should pursue, despite her family and friends' warnings that "it's not going to pay you well":

It reconfirmed some things about me. I knew that I wanted to be in the humanities and I really love poetry, but I didn't know how I could do it. Everyone was like, "Oh, you can't follow your dreams because it's not going to pay you well." That's kind of where I was going, but then seeing the teachers there and they love humanities so much, I'm like, "I can make a career out of this." It kind of made me realize I do want to teach. I want to teach humanities in some way, in some sort of capacity. I really love it. It made me realize, OK, well, once I finish this program, I need to see the proper steps to become a teacher.

And for Luisa, a 68-year-old 2016 graduate, the course reignited an interest in art. While her two granddaughters enrolled in the Clemente course after she graduated, Luisa enrolled in art classes at a nonprofit organization:

I'm taking it one step at a time this year, because I'm not exactly a teenager, you know? [laughs] So, I am going to be doing stuff, but one step at a time. First I want to do my art, I'm really looking forward to that.

## **Community Engagement**

Democratic citizenship is a fundamentally participatory ideal (London, 2000). To Dewey (1927), the relationship between the citizen and community was symbiotic: "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (p. 213). To this end, about half of the students I interviewed thought they had become more socially and/or politically engaged since

Clemente. I heard statements from students such as “I’m more inclined to work in the community, more politically motivated than I was before”; “I learned compassion in Clemente, so I started volunteering”; “I started collecting books for little kids who might not have them”; and “Me and my kids go feed the homeless at the church once a week now.” Tim, for example, started volunteering more after Clemente, and Shalisa began to contemplate a career in a field that would “be beneficial to the community”:

Tim: I am a better person for one. . . . In fact I’m actually, I’m going to take part in a project in Haiti that entails, again, humanitarian services, and that is to give back, you know? So, I’ve been doing more of that and, you know, I’ve done it before but not in the same respect that I do it today.

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Shalisa: Just kind of based on the things I learned about myself during the course, it made me think that, you know, a career in something like social work would not only be beneficial to the community, but it’s something that I didn’t know that I could be good at. But by taking the course, I think now that I would be.

Charity: Mm-hmm. You said that you learned some things about yourself during the course, would you be willing to expand on that?

Shalisa: Sure, like I said, I’ve always kind of had, I’ll call it passionate opinions, but I have never really thought about ways I could make a difference in my area and in my community. Between the professors and also other students that I’ve met through the course, I realized that even small things can have an impact if you just kind of take some action. I just really feel like I needed some guidance in that area. So, the fact that I’ve been spending more time and learning more from some of the students who are more active in the communities. To have all these different kinds of outreach programs or work with all these different kinds of programs, I just realized that, I *can* do something, so I’m trying to.

Similarly, Ronald became more aware of his community and the role he could play in positive change, and Ivory became more active and hoped to move more towards activism:

Ronald: For once, I have a better awareness of what goes on around my friends and my community and, if anything, what I’ve learned from it is I can assume a role in my community. I can do things to change things for the better . . .

I have a better awareness of my community. ... I'm more revitalized than ever before.

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Ivory: I'm more active in my community than before – volunteering at school, working in a community garden. I'm a part of a community garden organization. I'd like to be more, like an *activist*. Clemente pushed me in that direction.

According to Dewey (1909), to be a citizen one must “contribute to the values of life, add to the decencies and graces of civilization wherever he is” (p. 10). Data indicate that Clemente provides students with the educative experiences that motivate many students to become more politically “aware” and more apt to cast well-informed votes:

Luciana: It made you feel socially aware. I, you know, I really don't care about politics *at all*, and I only voted for the first time for the last president. That was my first time voting in my whole life, and so, now as a result of her class, she [professor] made me feel like politics is not just about picking a president. That, you know, the idea that we use politics in everyday choices was a new concept for me. So, what I think that she did is she gave me a real, like, a much greater appreciation for my own voice and politics as a whole. Even if we don't make the change we want, we can still move towards change even if someone else picks up where we left off, you know what I mean?

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Sondra: So, it just changed me as a citizen. I always voted, but I felt more educated when voting [after Clemente]. I don't vote just to vote anymore.

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Stephanie: I do this thing, I call it ‘close listening.’ [laughs] I want to hear both sides of everything now. I get a lot of shit from my friends because I watch FOX [news]. Well, I want to hear what they got to say. ... It doesn't mean I might go and vote for stupid ass Donald Trump. ... You have to know, I think that's important and I don't think you can make informed decisions unless you know all sides of a situation. ... I get so angry when I find out, when they tell you what the voter turnout is, and I hear people complaining about government all the time, like, “Well, did you vote?” “No, I didn't vote.” It irritates me, so I think getting people engaged in politics and getting them to understand the importance of voting, that's

something that I'm really big on now.

In *Our Declaration*, Danielle Allen (2014) similarly recalled how her Clemente students “experienced a personal metamorphosis” as they absorbed the *Declaration of Independence*: “They found themselves suddenly as political beings, with a consciousness that had previously eluded them. They built a foundation from which to assess the state of their political world” (p. 35). Clemente staff shared many examples of students who came to see themselves as “political beings” and who subsequently became more engaged in their communities over the years. Katherine, a course director of just a couple years, had recently met with a former student interested in doing something meaningful for his community. She recounted their conversation:

A student who was from the course a few years ago had come to meet with me and said, “I just loved my experience and, honestly, I want to create one on the east side.” And I was like, “I mean, I agree, we definitely do, but you know, it costs like \$50,000 a year for each of the course sites.” So, I was like, well, first we would have to find \$50,000. But I said, there has to be something we can do like in the meantime, until maybe someday we do get one on the east side. So, he's like, “Yeah, I want to have, like, a dialogue series in my community where we read and we think, we really read *critically*, and I want youths to be engaged. . . . We have super low voter turnout and young people don't really believe in the voting process as something that could make change. You know, I think being engaged in this way and really being taught to think, like, *critically* about things will help people make a difference.”

Similarly, Manuel, the director of an organization responsible for financial and administrative support for its state's Clemente courses, said:

It seems like the course does have an impact in terms of their [students'] thinking of themselves within the social and political world around them. We've certainly seen a lot of graduates of the course go on to create things in their communities. So, they've started little lending libraries or they've started literacy programs. We've seen some of them take on leadership roles among other Clemente graduates where, for example, they begin to sort of take note of culturally what's happening within the city and invite other Clemente students or alumni to go to those events.

## **Control**

It stands to reason that a healthy deliberative democracy would benefit from citizens who

feel not only confident, engaged, and reflective, but also in control of their lives. I was interested, then, if students felt like they had control of their lives, and the ways in which Clemente may or may not factor into that feeling. A small estimate of students in the sample felt they did not have more control over their lives. Students generally attributed their lack of control to their belief in God. For example:

Shelsy: I have to be honest with you, nothing would be possible without God. I really believe that God is the force of my life, that, you know, He really directed me towards Clemente.

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Estelle: Actually I've given control of my life over to God. ... I have control over what I do and say, but my steps are ordered by God.

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Cody: I feel like my life is in God's hands. ... I really think He has a purpose for me. ... If I happen to divert from it for whatever reason, He has a way of, you know, kind of redirecting me. So, I don't see my life as being under my control. ... God is in control, and that's the most I know.

In the second group, also a minority, were students who thought they had only partial control. Students attributed this lack of control to a host of things – financial constraints, education limitations, and unstable employment and housing, among others. For example, Natasha and Bruce both thought they had control over individual choices they made, but there were larger forces, such as racism, which directly impacted their lives as African Americans and seemed beyond their control:

Natasha: Yeah, in the general sense. I know that the choices that I make, for sure I have control. There are some things that are out of your control like racism. ... I still kind of have to deal with certain things that are, like, a little bit racially motivated. ... So that's something I would say, like, it's out of my control.

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Bruce: No. Being a person of color, every day I have to deal with not only the immediate traumas, but the institutional trauma that my ancestors carried and passed forward. We live in a world that is more uncertain than it's ever been. Am I in control of my ability to do good deeds, to help other people? Absolutely, but am I in control of this reality I live in? No, none of us are.

Similarly, Kiki felt that she had control, but only “to a point.” Not having a college degree hindered her employment prospects, and she attributed the bias toward college graduates to “society”:

To a point. It's frustrating for me in that if I leave a job, I then have to start again at the bottom. I attribute that to society ... Even if your resume shows you've done that job, you can't even apply for another job someplace else, because you don't have a degree. That has been frustrating for me, so I think that has made me feel kind of helpless, in that every time I leave a job, I go back to the bottom.

Jennie, who was a single mother raising a daughter as well as her sister's son, felt like the world around her was a “hurricane”:

Not always, no. I mean, I can control how I kind of react to the things going on around me, but something humanities helped me lock into is my perspective. ... I honestly think of the world, everyone in it and around me, as the hurricane and I am really the only thing that I can control. I think that's where a lot of people mess up, because we do look for those excuses, we do think the world owes us something, and ... it would be nice if everybody was kind, just, and everything was balanced. But I don't think that's the way of the world. So, I just do my best to control *me* ... no matter how hard I get hit.

The largest group – three-quarters of the sample – included those who felt that they *did* have more control over their lives. Some students attributed their feelings of control to moving forward, rather than regressing or stagnating, and focusing on goals they had set for themselves:

Shanté: Yeah. ... I guess I would just say that because I'm not where I was four years ago. Everything I'm doing is positive, and I'm going forward instead of backwards.

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Carla: Yes, I feel like I'm starting to [have control]. I think, I would say, back even in the summer time, I was pretty frustrated by the idea of, or just

afraid of not having the right direction and having made mistakes and just being overwhelmed with the decisions that I needed to make to go forward. But then going back to school has really helped me, you know, even though it keeps me busier. It also just makes me feel kind of centered in the sense that learning is, like, one of the most important things. It just feels good to have that in my life, and it's more important than, you know, making a lot of money or having a big house or something like that.

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Shalisa: I feel like as I get older, I'm realizing that I do have control. The things that I thought, like, were out of my control, it's just because I wasn't focused enough. I wasn't focused enough on the long-term goals that I should have.

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Al: I do now, remarkably, I do now. ...My goal was to get my kids out of high school and into college, and then once I did that, my next goal was to figure out what I was going to do with my career because I had been doing it for so long. Then, of course, the next goal was to get myself into school. That was a five-year plan for me, and all of that literally happened within a nine-month period [of Clemente]. So, I feel blessed. So, because of that, I feel like I'm doing OK and I'm at where I'm supposed to be and it can only get better, and it *is* getting better.

Other students, like Ornella, Sheree, and Anita, expressed feeling like they had control because they could tackle challenges without giving up and could exercise choice in their lives:

Ornella: Yes, so before there was the drug addiction, the diagnosis of the bipolar. I was just kind of floundering in life, and now I have some choices. One of the things I do ... is a vision board, and I have things on it. I look at it every day, and I'm watching some of the, *many* of the things that are on there come to fruition. So, yeah, the answer to that question do I feel like I have control? Yes. I mean, obviously, nature happens from time to time and people die or situations come up. But I don't feel like whatever comes for me to face, I don't feel like I can't face it. I'll face it, and I'll be victorious over whatever it is.

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Sheree: I do. I do feel like I have more of a handle. I can think more deeply about situations that I come across than I could have before. I feel like if something comes up, I'm not going to go, "Oh, I can't do this. I'm just going to give up." I feel like, OK, I have these tools, these things I learned,

I can go through to help me with these issues.

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Anita: I think I do. . . . What makes me feel like I'm in control, I know that at any point in my life I have choices to make. So, that's why I feel like I'm in control of what's in front of me – I'll always have choice, always, unless I have no breath.

Paulo Freire outlines several stages in consciousness growth which culminate in critical thought. The lowest stage is the most dominated – intransitive thought – where people live fatalistically, thinking that their fate is out of their hands. Only luck or God can influence their lives, which was the case for some students in this study's sample (Shor, 1993). The idea that one's fate is beyond one's control is also indicative of an external locus of control. Seminal work on locus of control can be traced to Julian Rotter (1954), who distinguished between internalizers and externalizers:

Internal versus external control refers to the degree to which persons expect that a reinforcement or an outcome of their behavior is contingent on their own behavior or personal characteristics versus the degree to which persons expect that the reinforcement or outcome is a function of chance, luck, or fate, is under the control of powerful others, or is simply unpredictable. (Rotter, 1990, p. 489)

Those students who felt they had partial and full control of their lives would likely fall into Freire's semi-transitive consciousness, where people exercise *some* thought and action for change, or critical transitivity, where individuals feel empowered to think and act on conditions around them and relate "those conditions to the larger contexts of power in society" (Shor, 1993, p. 31). Critical consciousness could likely be tied to a higher internal locus of control; these individuals feel in control and empowered to affect change. Students' sense of control is significant because research has demonstrated that high internal locus of control among adults

has been associated with higher levels of job satisfaction and job performance (Colquitt, LePine, & Wesson, 2015; Ng, Sorensen, & Eby, 2006; Spector, 1986); parental efficacy and persistence (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997); political participation (Rosen & Salling, 1971; Strickland, 1965); and positive health behaviors (Evans, Owen, & Marsh, 2005; MacDonald, 1970; Wallston & Wallston, 1978; Wallston, Wallston, Smith, & Dobbins, 1987). Research has also examined the extent to which locus of control serves as a predictor of academic outcomes for adult students. Internal locus of control is associated with better college adjustment (Martin & Dixon, 1989; 1994), higher GPA (Cone & Owens, 1991; Rose, Hall, Bolen, & Webster, 1996), academic achievement (Gifford, Briceño-Perriott, & Mianzo, 2006; Stupinsky, Renaud, Daniel, Haynes, & Perry, 2008), critical thinking and executive brain functions (Stupinsky et al., 2008), and goal setting (Dollinger, 2000). It is possible that locus of control could be associated with Clemente students' persistence – or lack thereof – in postsecondary education and, likewise, could be associated with attrition in the Clemente course itself (more on attrition in Chapter 8). Although the majority of students in the sample felt that they were in control of their lives, it is important to note that one's locus of control *can* be modified (Hawkes, 1991). While it is not a concept frequently connected with current literature in adult education, adult educators seeking to encourage students might benefit from considering students' sense of perceived control.

## **Conclusion**

In closing, data indicate that most students and staff feel that the course has a positive impact in ways that observers believe encourage students to be democratic citizens. Many students report thinking “differently” and more critically; they feel confident in expressing themselves orally and in writing; they feel motivated to engage in society in some form; and most students feel in control of their destiny. All of these are important for the health of a

deliberative democracy. For those students who felt they had partial or no control over their lives, locus of control is not a fixed trait. Clemente staff can play an active role in cultivating perceived control among students, should they want to.

The humanities play a unique role in the formation of citizens. Studying literature, history, philosophy, and art history pushes students to think for themselves and pursue autonomy. The humanities do this by cultivating reflective or critical thinking and helping students to formulate, analyze, and evaluate arguments – all practices that can trace their roots back to Socrates. The point here is not to defend the humanities based on their instrumental value. The humanities are, after all, valuable for their own sake. Rather, the point is to highlight the fact that students *do* leave the course with skills that they value, skills that can contribute to a healthy democracy.

## CHAPTER 7: Parenting

“Educating the people around me has become important. ... Socrates, I should’ve read in the eighth grade or something. I want my great grandchildren to know who Rosa Parks is, who Martin Luther King is, who Socrates is. ... The benefits of this program will be through my great grandchildren. I talk about it to them, how important it is to read, to be educated, to reach out to people and teach them.”

– Florence, 2015 graduate, African American, age 61

“It [Clemente] gives you the tools to push your children and mold your children’s minds to be those scholars, to give them that thirst to be a scholar, you know what I’m saying? ... We can start a legacy, we can set a hunger and a thirst in our children’s hearts and minds. ... Because once you’re educated, you begin to educate your household. Once you get elevated, you elevate your household. When your standards get raised, your household’s standards get raised. When your horizon has been broadened, your family’s horizon has been broadened.”

– Aurora, 2004 graduate, African American, age 50

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This study began with an interest in low-income urban parenting and parental engagement, and while the scope of my dissertation research ultimately shifted to include all Clemente students, my interest in parents did not disappear. Although there is no nationwide data on the number of parents who take Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses, the majority of this study’s sample of students and graduates were parents – 54 of the 76 interviewees – and most of the students in the Clemente classes I observed were as well. Parenting is highly visible at Clemente since many students utilize the course’s child care. Children are regularly *seen* at Clemente – not only in child care but also in the elevators and in the halls, at outside events like picnics, museum trips, and walking tours, and sometimes even in the classroom alongside their mom or dad – and children are *talked about* at Clemente. Students frequently make connections between course texts and their children and the way they parent them, as well as the way they were parented. To this point, one former course director said:

I rarely have just a single, non-parent type student. It often comes up in our discussions. They hardly can talk about the topics without talking about their own parents or being a parent, how it changes the way they want to parent their children. It’s a big part of what

we talk about.

Over the course of two years of sitting among Clemente student-parents in class, talking with them, and meeting their families, I often wondered what effect, if any, the course had on students' parenting. Was there a relationship between course participation and students' parenting. Did parents do anything differently as a result of Clemente? Did they feel more confident, more engaged?

### **Why So Many Women?**

To use the term "parent," however, is a bit of a misnomer. Women outnumber men in Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses nationally, and that is also the case with this study's sample. Of the 54 parents interviewed, 41 were mothers and just 13 of were fathers. This means that a Clemente classroom – including the two I observed – often becomes a community of women, many of whom are mothers. I was curious what the students and instructors thought of this; why did they think more women than men were in the courses? Answers ranged wildly, though most could be categorized according to one of four themes: (1) women's personalities made them more apt to enroll; (2) enrollment simply mirrored higher education trends; (3) there were fewer men because of disproportionate incarceration; and, most often, (4) there were typically more women in class because mothers – particularly *single* mothers – were motivated to improve their lot through education.

Some students attributed the lack of men in class to fundamental differences between women and men – "It's a biological thing," one female student explained. Women, some students argued, were more "ambitious," "focused," "consistent," and "well-rounded" than men, who were more "narrow-minded," "egotistical," and "restless" than women. Women in this camp pulled no punches with their responses and were, quite often, very critical of men. This

perspective is exemplified by Stephanie and Luisa, recent course graduates in their forties, and Natasha and Jamila, both 2016 graduates in their early twenties (each of these respondents was from a different course site):

Stephanie: OK, are we mincing words here? Men are stupid and I'm just going to be honest, it's something about them, they have a hard time grasping things, that's all I can say. Not all of them. I don't know, it's the *thinking* thing with them – they just don't like it, and that's just me being honest. I just think that's just too much. Sometimes I think it can challenge what they believe and they may not like that.

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Luisa: I think men are restless and women are focused, you know? Women, we *get to it*. We do a lot of stuff that men just don't bother with because they are very, I'm sorry, I don't mean to beat on men, but they can be a little narrow-minded. We're willing to stretch out and go beyond certain points.

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Natasha: I feel like it could be an ego thing. I feel like men have, like, this egotistical way that "I don't really need that" or "I know this already," as opposed to women who are more so like, "Yeah, let's do it. Let's go for it. Let's see what this is about." We want to be involved. ... We work harder.

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Jamila: I feel women are way more ambitions than men. If they're going to hear something about an opportunity, they're going to want to jump at it, where men are, like, ... comfortable doing the most mediocre thing, or the lightest thing, the least amount of work.

Others, particularly instructors and course directors, saw Clemente enrollment mirroring that of higher education in general. "One thing I learned is that virtually all forms of adult education are disproportionately female," said Laura, who directed a Clemente course for 15 years. "So, it isn't necessarily something unique to our population." Marcus, a Clemente history professor, argued that Clemente's enrollment "mirrors kind of an educational trajectory of Black America. I mean, many more Black women go to college and graduate or are in higher education

than Black men.” Indeed, women make up the majority of students in all sectors of higher education, and a Pew Research Center analysis of US Census Bureau data shows that females outpace males in college enrollment, especially among Blacks and Hispanics (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2014).

Some students and staff, however, attributed the lack of male students to disproportionate incarceration. As one course director, who admitted 26 women and four men to the 2015-2016 class, said, “The sad thing is that a lot of the men who would be eligible are in prison.” Similarly, Ornella, a 63-year-old 2007 graduate, argued:

When we look at who is in jail and prison, it’s Black men, unproportionately [sic] to what society looks like. ... So, of course that’s going to affect if we’re looking at low-income people being recruited to Clemente, a big chunk of them aren’t even *available in society*.

And Rick, who himself had spent decades incarcerated, also attributed the lack of men in Clemente to mass incarceration: “Well, there are so many men in prison,” he said. “The population of men in the penitentiary is phenomenal.”

Most responses, however, pertained to single parenting. Heather, a former course director, and Jeremy, a current course director, both saw single mothers disproportionately attracted to Clemente:

Heather: A lot of single moms told us they were doing it so that they could provide for their kids and be better role models for their kids. So, maybe being the custodial parent versus single fathers might have been a motivation.

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Jeremy: I think another thing that is probably under acknowledged is that a lot of young mothers, many of them single mothers, are drawn to Clemente as a space where they can exercise some self-care and can have some relief from the rigors of single parenting.

Jackson, a 2007 graduate with no children, heard about the course from his mother who also

graduated from Clemente. He speculated that women who were single mothers were likely attracted to the course as a way to better their children's lives:

I hope you know I'm trying to, like, use my words carefully, but it may have something to do with single mothers. ... I don't wanna typecast, but they will get to that point in their lives when they realize that, like, "I need to continue my education for my family." I think that it's, you know, a move not only for them but for their daughter or son [too].

An excerpt from my field notes from a Clemente orientation night confirms Jackson's thinking. The first class night is typically an orientation for students; they are introduced to one another, as well as to the curriculum. As the students went around the room introducing themselves, I noted that several women described themselves first and foremost as single mothers taking the course for their children:

Valentina introduces herself as a "single mom of four and a native of the Dominican Republic." She is here with her sister, Carmen, who doesn't have children of her own but is a "devoted auntie" to Valentina's four. Valentina says her purpose is "to get a degree, because it's hypocritical for me to tell my kids to go to college when I haven't done it. I want to inspire them because they inspire me." ...

Tonie introduces herself as a single mother of three daughters and a grandmother of one. "One of the reasons I'm here is to indoctrinate my daughters," she says. "I'm 25 credits shy of my bachelor's degree, and I just want to show them how important education is."

...  
Victoria starts her introduction by saying she's a "high school drop out." "I've been taking GED classes since 2008," she says, "and I still don't have it. ... I've got two beautiful kids and one on the way." She says her daughter is six, and "*at six years old*, my daughter has no interest in school, doesn't like kindergarten, doesn't wanna do anything herself. If she knows I'm a high school dropout, then *what am I doing as a mother?*" She says she has her CNA certificate and wants to be an RN. "I've gotta show my kids, really, the sky is the limit – it's as high as the sky can go for my kids." Everyone claps.

Parental education is one of the strongest determinants of children's educational outcomes (Reardon, 2011), with considerable research demonstrating intergenerational correlations between parent and child educational attainment (Duncan, Magnuson, Kalil, & Ziol-Guest, 2012; Hertz et al., 2008). Although both fathers' and mothers' levels of education are related to children's outcomes, maternal education is particularly important because mothers are

typically the primary caregivers, particularly in low-income families where households are often single-mother headed (Edin & Kefalas, 2005). Indeed, of the 41 mothers interviewed for this study, 31 were single mothers.

Research demonstrates strong associations between levels of maternal education and children's academic outcomes, including language ability in early childhood (Dollaghan et al., 1999; Wen, Bulotsky-Shearer, Hahs-Vaughn, & Korfmacher, 2012); academic achievement throughout elementary, middle, and high school (Augustine & Crosnoe, 2010; Sirin, 2005); high school completion and college enrollment (Dubow, Boxer, & Huesmann, 2009; Pettit, Yu, Dodge, & Bates, 2009); as well as behavioral problems (Carneiro, Meghir, & Parey, 2013) and indicators of health (Currie & Moretti, 2003; Heck, Braveman, Cubbin, Chávez, & Kiely, 2006). Additional research has shown numerous parenting practices that are likely mechanisms of the association between maternal education and children's development. For example, mothers with higher levels of education use more complex language in the home (Hoff, 2003, 2006; Rowe, Pan, & Ayoub, 2005), engage in more cognitively stimulating parenting practices such as teaching their children numbers and letters (Hoff, Laursen, & Tardiff, 2002; Suizzo & Stapleton, 2007), and provide more educational resources in the home (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002; Rodriguez et al., 2009). More highly educated mothers also tend to be more engaged with their children's schooling, attending activities and meetings more frequently (Harding, 2015; Lareau, 2003/2011; Pomerantz, Moorman, & Litwack, 2007).

A recent study by Ziol-Guest, Duncan, and Kalil (2015) examined the relationships between children's completed schooling and a number of factors, including single-parent family structure. Analysis of data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) of children born between 1954 and 1986 indicates that children who grow up in single-parent homes complete

fewer years of education and are less likely to earn a college degree; increasing a mother's years of education by one standard deviation, or 2.6 years, added about three-quarters of a year to children's completed schooling (Ziol-Guest, Duncan, & Kalil, 2015).

### **Child Care**

Reiterating the importance of parental education in predicting children's educational attainment is valuable here because student-parents, particularly single mothers, face the unique challenge of balancing family, work, and academic responsibilities (Stone & O'Shea, 2013; van Rhijn, Smit Quosai, & Lero, 2011). Student parents in community college – a demographic similar to Clemente – consistently cite child care responsibilities as a chief reason for dropping out before completing a degree or certificate (Gault, Reichlin, Reynolds, & Froehner, 2014). There are ways to support low-income student-parents in higher education, however, and one of those ways is to provide child care (Mulhere, 2015). Indeed, the provision of child care was highly valued by Clemente's student-parents (both single and married), and one course director speculated that it might skew enrollment:

So, the cohort may be disproportionately composed of young mothers, younger parents, single parents because the course comes with the provision of free child care. I think that's a big thing.

Zia, a 2016 graduate, explained that her husband often worked late, so having child care available at Clemente “made a world of difference.” Similarly, other mothers stated that child care at Clemente “made the course possible,” “was one less thing I had to worry about,” and was “like a gift.” For Luciana, a single mother of three, free child care was a major reason why she enrolled and was able to complete the course:

It's free, it's *free*! If all the Clemente courses are helping you with child care, getting a meal for your kids when you get there, giving you a meal for free, letting you focus on the course and know your child is being taken care of, you know? ... Those were the major reasons why I was able to do it, and why I accepted it.

For Shanté, a single mother of one while taking the course, free child care helped to make the experience virtually “stress free.” She said:

They [Clemente] even provide child care, like, how can you beat *that*? So, really, like, they make it stress free. I mean, I don’t have to worry about child care, nothing. My kid was being fed, I was being fed, there wasn’t a negative about it.

While all students in the sample who utilized Clemente’s child care spoke positively about the provision, a distinct subset spoke enthusiastically and at significant length about child care. That subset of parents was a part of Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses that offered *humanities-themed* child care. A handful of sites across the US offer child care that mirrors the adults’ Clemente course and gives children enrichment in writing and art, for example. Such programs are no more than a couple years old, and Wendy, a Clemente staff member who coordinates her site’s child care program, explained what she and the course director hoped to achieve through the child care program:

In our child care program, we mirror what’s going on in the adult class. ... So, we try to do the same thing, same kind of themes so that they [children] go home and talk about “what does it mean to be a friend?” or “what is justice?” around the dinner table and the whole family’s involved. And, really, the kids remind their parents to do their homework! ... It’s just really important to give them [children] two hours of just a great night with a lot of things happening, a lot of interesting projects going on with a place where they can feel totally safe. Their world is not totally safe, it really isn’t. ... We’re just very, very low-key, no negative [talk], if we can. ... Of course, the child care program is highly structured. It’s very, very important to make sure that there’s something that they can count on that’s simply the same every time they come, but within that structure there’s a lot going on based on their capacity to understand it or not or just to enjoy it. Yeah, just to enjoy it. So, that’s the greatest thing about Clemente – not having to do any of this crazy standardized stuff.

High quality child care is intentional, developmentally appropriate, and provides a sense of routine, which is important in a child’s development because it affords a much-needed sense of security (Carter, 2016; Sytsma, Kelley, & Wymer, 2001). Neither course site I observed provided this enrichment-style child care. In the child care settings at my research sites, children

were safe and, when I would pop my head in from time to time, appeared happy and content, but the environments were neither structured nor particularly intellectually stimulating, and the staff were not trained in age-appropriate humanities instruction. Most of what I saw was babysitting, as opposed to developmentally appropriate enrichment.

Mothers spoke highly of the humanities-themed child care, largely because they perceived their children to be learning and were able to discuss the humanities subject matter with them. For example, Shelsy, a 2013 graduate, said her third-grade daughter “love[d]” the children’s program and even continued on once Shelsy had graduated (at least one site allows alumni to continue to enroll their children in the enrichment program):

My daughter loves it, she really loves it. She gets to interact with kids. She gets to learn so much. It’s very much so the experience that I had [in Clemente], just more appropriate for her age level.

Similarly, Jennie’s daughter “loved” the enrichment and also asked to continue the program once Jennie had graduated:

They have a Clemente for kids. So, my daughter participated on class night. While I was in class, she was in a literacy class that was geared towards the children. ... It’s something where we interacted with them, they got to do showcases of their written work. [She] loved it, she actually asked to repeat it again the following year.

And both Carol and Inez, graduates of different sites, commented on how the enrichment-style child care fostered discussion between children and parents:

Carol: Involving the students in a course ... involving children is so important because children kind of like what their parents are doing. ... That way, you know, they can collaborate about the class, talk about what they learned.

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Inez: So, my children are also taking the mini humanities course where they are teaching them about people and history and stuff like that. So, I have a six-year-old and then an eight-year-old that’s in the child care. They come back and they talk about it. Then they were able to go to the museum also

and see excavations. So, I was able to say, “Hey, Flora, did you see this and did you see that?” They were able to relate to it and we were able to talk about it.

Wendy, the child care coordinator cited earlier, actually mentioned Inez and her children – spontaneously – during our interview. From Wendy’s perspective, Inez’s children’s participation in the child care program was a source of pride and connection for their mother:

We have one mother who has 10 children this year, and there’s the two little ones who are eight and six – the youngest ones – and they came [to child care]. So, that was really amazing, and I think she would say that the Clemente course has really helped her just enjoy her kids, because there’s so many stresses. There was this exhibition at the art museum on cats, so I brought in a puppet maker, and her two children made cat puppets. They were entered in the art museum show and are hanging in the art museum show right now! ... Yeah, so they are representing Clemente for all of us, those two little kids, and that meant a *huge* amount to their mom. I mean, she was just *glowing* about that. That’s such a little thing, but it says a lot.

Many mothers also valued this type of child care because they hoped their children would have the same positive, even transformative, experience that they’d had in Clemente. On this point, mothers commented: “I hope she [daughter] sees the light I saw,” “I just want my children to learn all the things I should’ve learned when I was young,” and “Clemente changed my life. I can’t imagine what would’ve happened if I’d had that knowledge, and that type of teaching, when I was a child.” There was only one outlier on the subject of child care, and it was not a parent. Rachel, a former Clemente social worker, contended that the child care at one particular site wasn’t meeting students’ needs:

The child care thing isn’t super, at least at [site name]. I was talking to somebody who had a two-year-old. I was like, “Oh, why don’t you bring them?” She said, “Really, like, it’s 8pm. My kid goes to bed early. So, for me to keep her up like an extra half an hour, even just to get her home ... It would totally disrupt her schedule.” So, that person still has to hire somebody to watch her kid. And then somebody else was saying, somebody was bringing their small child and then ended up dropping out of the program because the child care providers aren’t allowed to change diapers. So, they would have to come interrupt the classroom every time, like, “Oh, your kid is screaming, come.” So, sure it’s child care, but people have chosen to drop out of the program rather than bring their children. ... So, I think the child care thing is still an issue even though we technically

have child care.

In Rachel's account, a parent didn't want to disrupt her child's sleep schedule. This poses a problem that the Clemente program could not necessarily solve, other than to reimburse the parent for outside child care, which is something most courses don't have the financial resources to do. It is possible that the issue of diaper-changing, however, could be remedied. Child care is provided precisely so that parents can experience the course *uninterrupted*. If the diaper changing policy is not dictated by state or insurance policy, it could likely be reexamined by Clemente staff. It is important to reiterate, though, that these criticisms weren't mentioned by any students, instructors, or course directors at *any* sites, and all parents in the sample spoke positively of the child care provided and, as noted, spoke glowingly of the humanities-based children's programs.

### **Impact on Parenting**

When I asked parents if their experience in Clemente had impacted their parenting in any way, 51 of the 54 parents answered yes. For the three who answered no, two attributed it to the age of the children – “They're already grown and left the house” – and one, a recent graduate at the time of our interview, attributed it to not having enough distance from the course – “I can't say as yet if it has [affected my parenting]. Maybe with time it will.” Affirmative responses typically fell into two broad categories: parents believed the course made them better role models for their children and/or encouraged them to engage on a deeper level with their children (e.g., have substantive discussions, ask them questions, advocate for them, and so on).

**Role Models.** “Of the numerous predictive cues that influence behavior at any given moment,” Bandura (1986) argues, “none is more common or informative than the actions of others” (p. 206). While there are myriad role models that might influence an individual's social

learning, parental role models are particularly relevant, since children are typically exposed to their parents' behaviors on a regular basis. To be sure, the behavior that children observe and learn from their parents affects their development, and research has demonstrated the significance of adults' behavior as a standard for children's behavior (Eccles, 1993). This "observational learning" is one of the mechanisms through which children absorb a range of social conventions (Bandura & Walters, 1963; Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1992).

At various points in interviews and in the classroom, Clemente parents referenced the idea of observational learning: "I want my child to *see* me being a student. I want to *show* them they can do it"; "I wanted to *show* my children that they can be successful, because look at Mommy;" and "I want them to go to college, and the way that I can do that is to *show* them that by doing it myself" [emphasis added]. Through these statements, parents were expressing their desire to be positive role models for their children; they wanted to convey high educational aspirations to their children, and *show* them those dreams are attainable (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Froiland, Peterson, & Davison, 2012).

Over half of the parents in the sample expressed the importance of being a positive example for their children and believed that Clemente had helped them become better educational role models for their children. They routinely talked about "leading by example" and underscored the importance of their children *seeing* them as Clemente students, in various forms:

Philip:           What helps them [children] is to *see* their father going to school, going to college. ... I think it's more motivation for them to do the same and see the importance of education.

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Arnaud:           It helped me create, like, a learning environment in my surroundings. So, I have kids and they know that I'm a dad and I'm focusing on my

education, studying, and so on. So, it's like they saw that study area, those books. They saw something really interesting going on, and I think that inspired them ... to take their studies seriously, because education is a way to free yourself from so many things.

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Phyllis: It definitely impacted my home life because I have two younger children. As a parent you have to lead by example, and for them to come to the graduation – because we had a ceremony and we got an *actual* certificate, we got *actual* transcripts with an *actual* GPA – they were very proud of me. So, my daughter, who is like 16, she was just praising me, like, “Mom, you did it! I’m really proud of you.” So, with that being an example I set for her. Now we’re talking about colleges, possibly her going into the Marines. So, that one little piece of me going to the Clemente course last year was just amazing.

Many parents – 23 of the 54 – felt that the specific act of doing homework was important for their children to see and made the parents feel like they were “leading by example”:

Carol: Then the kids see their grandparents or their mothers and their fathers doing homework, maybe even struggling with it but still having a desire to complete the assignment or their education, I think it’s wonderful. It shows the kids that, yeah, school can be hard, but it’s worth it and you can do it.

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Luciana: I mean, for me, going to school and having homework and things like that, sitting down and doing it, shows them how important it is for them to do their homework. So, I think that it did make me a better role model for them.

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Jalisa: I have a daughter, she’s 3 going on 4, and she knows I have homework. She’s excited. She says, “Mom, you’ve got homework?!” So, she sees me doing my school work, and I think that’s good for her. I feel like I’m leading by example.

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Thiago: My daughter would always notice, “Oh, you’re doing that homework, Dad!” So, it did, like, go into my family and they saw me in action, and that was a good thing for them.

Rick had a 28-year-old son whom he wanted to encourage to continue his education, but because he had been incarcerated for almost all of his son's life, Rick wanted to avoid being prescriptive.

He thought just mentioning his homework would send a positive message to his son:

I want to encourage him but not pound him in his head with, "Do this. Do this. Do this." I want to lead by example, and let him know what I'm doing. When he calls and asks what I'm doing, I say, "I'm working on this paper" or "I'm working on some homework," so he knows what I'm doing and he knows it's a good thing.

Jeremy, a course director, even mentioned parental role modeling as a goal for his site's course and made a specific reference to homework:

Some ... goals include laying a foundation for further schooling, providing an important role model for children, and creating a better basis for mentoring of children of students enrolled.... The goal of providing an example to children that are just starting pre-school, elementary school, and just kind of modeling that: "Here is my homework, and here I am sitting at the table and doing it. That's what this looks like."

Rebecca, also a course director, recounted having a father who made a point to do his Clemente homework *with* his children, even including his youngest child who couldn't read but mimicked what he saw the others doing:

We had a student and he would do homework for the class, and his four boys would gather around the kitchen table with him to do homework too. The little one couldn't read yet, and he turned the book upside down and pretended to read like that. [laughs] I think just the fact that you see parents that are looking upwards or walking across the graduation stage has an impact on kids.

Tiana, a 2015 course graduate in her late forties, did not have any children but worked with kindergarteners and fourth graders as a teacher's assistant in a public elementary school. The students knew she was taking the course, and they regularly saw her with her "school bag" and books. Tiana believed that being in the course gave her another "connection" to the students and that she served as an example that "you're never too old to learn."

Tiana:           Some days I would be in there working on my paper, if they were testing and the room was quiet. I'd get me an iPad and I would bring my books

and I would do my homework in class – but only when [students were] testing, when I knew I would have time to do it without interruptions. So, yeah, and then they would say, “Bring your paper in and then let me see it.” I would bring my papers in and let the kids see what Laura [critical thinking and writing teacher] wrote. ... They knew, when they saw me with my school bag: “Oh, she finna to do her homework! Leave her alone!” So, they were very good about letting me work *at* work. So, that’s why I got a lot of things done at school. ... They would want to get my books and they would try to read it. So, some that I knew could, like, read up to a sixth grade level, [I’d say], “Here” when they got done with the test. Yeah, so, I would let them look at it and read it. So, it gave me another connection with the children, rather than [saying], “Do your homework.”

Charity: Do you think it meant anything to them that you were in school?

Tiana: Yeah, they told me I was too old, that I was too old to be going to school. I wanted to let them know that you’re never too old to learn, and that’s what I told them.

I spent a year with Tiana in class, and she often talked about her students and what she perceived as a lack of positive parental role models for them. An excerpt from my field notes underscores how the course helped her serve as a role model for her students. In a conversation before class,

Tiana said:

I try to lead by example because we’re in a different time. It’s not ‘do as I say not as I do’ anymore. I can’t tell them to do homework when I’m not doing it myself. I try to say homework is cool. “Do your homework instead of playing the Xbox,” because that’s what they say they do when they get home, play the Xbox.

While parents can “lead by example” by attending class and keeping up with schoolwork at home, there are few opportunities that I am aware of for children to see their parents as students in the classroom. Children weren’t included in any lessons I observed over the course of two years and only came into the classroom if the child care provider had to leave early, which happened only a handful of times, and children were never present for more than 15 minutes or so. Some courses that have humanities-themed child care invite the children to their parents’ classroom from time to time to share their work, present their writing, and so on, but,

again, these programs are new, and such instances would likely be less about parents modeling themselves as students to their children and much more about the children themselves. Barb, an American history professor in an all-women course, was the only instructor not at a site with humanities-themed child care who mentioned including students' children in class. In our interview, she recounted a lesson she leads every year on artifacts where she invites the students' children to be a part of the class. In this instance, the mothers are able to model being a student in the actual classroom:

Barb: Yeah, the other thing I do is, I bring artifacts, I'm a museum person. So, I do one week on artifacts studies. So, I bring artifacts and have the students break into groups. They have to figure out what it is, and when it was made, and what you can learn about life in America at that time. You know, life is in the artifacts, so, that's what I do. Usually when I do the artifacts is the kids' vacation [from school]. So, we invite their kids to participate too.

Charity: Oh, really, and how does that go?

Barb: It's fantastic, some of the kids have become friends of other kids. It's just nice. People like to see other people's kids. They care. They want to see each other's kids. ... One woman said, "I want my child to see me being a student." So, that's good. I think it affects some very much. They want to show that they can do it.

**Engagement with Children.** In addition to feeling like Clemente made them stronger role models for their children, many parents reported that they felt more engaged with their children and their children's education, talked to them more frequently and substantively, and asked them questions: "I talk to them more, and not just about superficial type stuff"; "I ask them questions now, about what they're actually studying in school, cause now I know a lot more"; "I go through my son's backpack every day like you wouldn't believe! When's the teacher conference? What's he got for homework? [I'm] looking for ways I can get in there and help him, you know?"

Aurora, a 2004 graduate, explained that she talked to her children about the course each night on their bus ride home and continued those intellectual discussions after the course ended. She went on to categorize her pre-Clemente parenting as “stunting” her children’s growth and felt that Clemente exposed her to a wider world that she subsequently encouraged her children to be a part of:

Aurora: Well, actually, when I was going to school [Clemente], they were going to [elementary] school. When I was in Clemente, on my way home because I didn’t have a car, on the bus, all we talked about was what I was learning, the books that we read and the classes, and those things. So, it was like they were going to school with me, and they were my sounding board. I was able to express myself about what I felt about the books that I’d read and the things that I experienced in class. And I continued those type of conversations with them even after the course was over. Just asking them questions is so important.

Charity: Did it [Clemente] affect the way that you parented or interacted with them in any way?

Aurora: Most definitely. The way that I parented before, I didn’t know that I was pretty much stunting their growth. I didn’t [know] because I, you know, I had a limited education at that time. I didn’t have any real thoughts about furthering my education or being educated, because I was proud already about being able to have a job and to feed my kids. Even though it might not have been the best place to live or the best foods that I could put on the table. ... So, me going to Clemente made me understand that, *I have not really lived*. I have not even touched the tip of being a citizen in this world, I mean also in this *country*! So, that made me want to let my kids know that they matter, they’re a part of this society, a part of the United States, they’re a part of *life*. So, I wanted them to be able to know that this was your life. Everything that’s here on Earth is for you. You don’t have to be limited to, like, a 10-block radius, you know what I’m saying?

Anita, 2016 graduate and a married mother of three, also engaged in intellectual dialogue with her children about the humanities, which she continued after the course:

One is 20 years old, one is 17, and the small one is just seven. Absolutely, they were involved in reading, some of them were my listeners, some of them were my readers of some of my papers. We had discussions about what we’d learned in class, because I was like, “I gotta talk to somebody about this!” And so my poor babies, they were mostly curious about me ranting about things that they probably didn’t know much about, plus

they were sharing what they'd read or learned about certain things and we were just kind of like giving our own ideas or opinions about certain topics and stuff like that, it was pretty fun. It was exciting.

I asked Anita if she felt that those conversations were a *result* of Clemente, or if she and her children had always engaged in lively discussions. She attributed it to Clemente. "Basically," she said, "I don't think those type of discussions would happen if I'd been going to a traditional school. It would never have happened – not like that – because I would've come home with my homework, buried my head in it, and did what I had to do, so to speak. I hope I'm coming across what I'm feeling ... because I went in [to Clemente] looking for courses and came out with something more than that – talking to my children about academics, philosophy, history, asking them questions, having debates, that's something I'm never gonna stop doing."

Sondra, a 2008 graduate, explained that while she had "always" talked to her children about their education and actively participated in school events and her children's activities, she wasn't fully *engaged* – "just going through the motions," she said. After Clemente, she felt like a part of her "rose up," a part that wasn't afraid to speak up for herself or her children:

Yes, it did change the way I interacted with them in that I always talked to them about their education, I always went to their school things, but sometimes I felt robotic, like I was just going through the motions. I didn't feel a lot of confidence in my own self. Now, I don't think they picked up on that, but what they *did* pick up on is all the confidence that I did get when I started going to Clemente. ... After Clemente, it was more than going through motions. When I would get weary and tired or struggle with depression or get frustrated with the school system or when different things weren't going right, well that part of me rose up and as a result of that rising up, I wasn't afraid to say something or give feedback in a positive way to the school system or to someone. They [children] start seeing that more. So, my interactions changed with them. ... So, yeah, I would say our communication changed because I brought more knowledge to what I was saying. When I would say something, I would say *why* I was saying it and that would come from an educational standpoint. ... So, yeah, interaction changed, became humorous, became happier, became more knowledgeable.

Similarly, Jennie, a 2015 graduate who spent many years in prison, felt that Clemente put her "way further along, educationally and as a parent" and motivated her engage to with her

daughter's education. She said:

I definitely think I stepped my game up monitoring school work and staying on top of her having educational opportunities instead of just free time. I mean, because I am definitely already thinking about her college and her future and what opportunities are available for her that will help her get over humps that maybe I have created or life just created, and Clemente is at the top of that list.

Many of the Clemente parents like Sondra and Jennie exemplify what Annette Lareau (2002; 2003/2011) terms “concerted cultivation parenting” – a “cultural orientation [that] entails a focus on parents’ active development of children’s skills and talents” (Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p. 605). Through her ethnographic work of 88 middle-class, working class, and poor African American and white families, Lareau (2003/2011) found that middle-class parents in her study were primarily concerned with cultivating their children’s abilities, helping them find and voice their own opinions, reasoning with them, and actively intervening on their children’s behalf in institutional settings. As research by Hart and Risley (1999), Hoff (2003), and Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Waterfall, Vevea, and Hedges (2007) also indicates, Lareau (2003/2011) found “there was quite a bit more talking in middle-class homes than in working-class and poor homes ” (p. 5). However, while talking was plentiful, directives were rare. Instead, parents tended to reason with children, making sure to explain the logic underlying their actions. Like Sondra said, parents with this orientation explained “why.” Alegra, an education director at an organization that hosts a long-time Clemente course, highlighted the divide between low-income and middle- and upper-class parenting:

I hate to sound classist, but I think that in the middle class, from the moment that a child is born, and talking and walking, people are talking: “Billy is going to college” and “When Billy goes to college, this is what Billy needs to do” and “This is what Mary Ann needs to do.” And so it’s ingrained in that child that they’re going to college, and in poor houses, that is not true. People think that they don’t have access, and so that mentality is not groomed. And I believe that by these [Clemente] students participating in a college course and being successful that they’re breaking that cycle, and that they’re developing the tools to be able to tell their children, “You need to go to college. You have to go to

college.” If they have older kids that’re seeing their mom in school, it’s drilling into them, “I need to do well in school. I have to go to school, because look at my mom. My mom is going to school. She values education, and she thinks it’s important. So, it must be important.”

On the flip side, Lareau found that both working-class and poor parents emphasized the “accomplishment of natural growth” (Lareau, 2003/2011). Parents with this orientation believe that as long as they provide the basics (e.g., love, food, safety), their children will thrive.

Although low-income families in the sample appeared to Lareau to be devoted to their children and hopeful for their success, they didn’t focus on developing their children’s abilities and didn’t typically intervene with institutions on their children’s behalf. Working-class and poor parents in the study issued more directives to their children, engaged in fewer prolonged discussions, provided fewer educational resources, and, in some households, placed more emphasis on physical discipline than did the middle-class parents (Lareau, 2003/2011).

To this end, several studies have suggested that lower income parents tend to be less involved in their children’s education than more affluent parents (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Research indicates that low-income parents typically hold equally high aspirations for their children as more affluent parents but feel less effective at influencing their children’s school achievement and behavior through involvement in their children’s schooling (Chavkin & Williams, 1989; Hill et al., 2004). Low-income parents often lack the time and necessary resources to engage in their children’s education and may be tentative in their interactions with schools and school personnel because of a self-perceived lack of competence (Jordan & Plank, 2000). By contrast, higher income parents report far fewer barriers to their participation, perceive greater self-efficacy, and are often more involved in their children’s education (Lareau, 1996; Wang & Sheikh-Khalil, 2014).

Neither the concerted cultivation or the natural growth parenting orientation is

fundamentally “better” than the other, but concerted cultivation, which it seems Clemente may help foster, holds more favor among educators and parenting experts:

There is little dispute among professionals on the broad principles for promoting educational development in children through proper parenting. These standards include the importance of talking with children, developing their educational interests, and playing an active role in their schooling. Similarly, parenting guidelines typically stress the importance of reasoning with children. ... Because these guidelines are so generally accepted, and because they focus on a set of practices concerning how parents should raise children, they form a dominant set of cultural repertoires about how children should be raised. (Lareau, 2003/2011, p. 4).

The “concerted cultivation” highlighted by many Clemente parents has been positively associated with students’ self-esteem, emotional self-regulation skills, and self-perceptions of academic ability (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Shumow & Lomax, 2002). Parental engagement in the form of academic socialization, in particular, helps parents to demonstrate their interest in their children’s well-being and openly communicate with them (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Furthermore, parents who monitor their children’s academic performance and communicate the importance of education may also contribute to their children’s happiness, psychological well-being, and emotional development (Chen & Gregory, 2009; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Shumow & Lomax, 2002).

In this study’s sample, many parents – about 70% – felt more engaged not only with their young children, but with their older children as well. Several parents talked at length about how the Clemente experience helped them relate to their children in college. Through Clemente, parents gained an understanding of some of the material, workload, and expectations of

postsecondary education. Al and Duke, for example, were both middle age custodial fathers with sons in college, and they both spoke of how they were able to “relate” to their sons’ college experience:

Al: I was actually talking to my son recently and we were talking about psychology and philosophy, and we both spoke about it. He told me about the people he was covering in class, and then I would tell him the people I was covering. We started to relate on that level in terms of the types of people that have come through history – people that we could study, people that we could learn from. ... Now it feels so much better, because now I can be a part of that [college] process.

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Duke: One of my younger sons is a student in college. So, yes, we had stuff to talk about how, about how do you work on papers, having to do research, and talking about how difficult that is. We talk a lot about philosophy because he’s taking humanities now. He got a chance to compare his difficulties, how the student life was against mine, and mine was nothing compared to his. It was 10 times harder [for my son] than I thought it was. ... Yeah, it was kind of great that way.

Estelle and Gloria both had daughters in college while they were students in Clemente. Like Al and Duke, the Clemente experience helped the women better relate to their children and, additionally, it built a sense of “comradery” between mother and daughter:

Estelle: Being a parent and also having a child who’s going to school for higher education, it allowed me to look at things a little more broad. ... It allowed me to step out of the parent role sometimes and be a student. My kid, to know what my kid is going through as opposed to, um, just Mom saying, “Do your homework.” ... She [daughter] was so proud because it was like she could now relate to me. And now I’m not just Mom, because I’m going through the same thing she’s going through. I’m just like her. ... She was out of state for college so we did a lot of phone stuff, and when she would be going through things I would understand. You know how parents, when their child says, “I gotta go,” you think, “Oh, well, something’s more important, or something more special than me.” But it’s like, “I gotta go *because I gotta finish writing this paper.*” I *understood* that, because I probably needed to be doing the same thing myself!

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Gloria: She [daughter] was away at college. So, she was in college and I could have a conversation with her. I understood where she was and where she's coming from. It was like two students talking about the college phase as opposed to mom talking to daughter. . . . So, she understood when I said, "I've gotta write this paper." She's like, "Yeah, I've gotta get off this phone because I need to tackle mine too." It was like a comradery. I was able to then be a friend and not a parent.

Similarly, Laura, a former course director, told me about a student who had a daughter in college, and although they talked regularly, the mother had never thought to ask her daughter about her coursework until she experienced being a student firsthand. "She did Clemente the year that her daughter was a senior [in college]," Laura said. "That was the *first time* that it occurred to her to ask her daughter what she was studying. . . . All the other times she would go, 'Honey, how are you?' You know, 'How are your grades? Do you need any money?' or whatever, and now it's like, 'Oh, well, what are you *learning*?'"

Parents of adult children not in college also remarked that they discussed the course with them, and how enjoyable it was to talk with their children about humanities. Velma, a 2010 course graduate, mentioned that she had a 42-year-old daughter with whom she frequently discussed the class. "I would tell her my assignments and books and whatnot. She shared in a lot how I felt about the class even though she lives in a different state. I would call her and tell her, 'Guess what I'm working on? Guess what I'm reading? We'd be all excited.'" Twenty-four of the 76 parents remarked how they appreciated having more books in the home. Parents often talked to their adult children about books they'd both read – "I found that my grown children knew a lot of these books, so that was really cool to talk about" – and parents of younger children shared their Clemente books with their kids. For example, Bruce remarked:

They [children] would see me like tackle monster papers and they would read my books. And Clemente hooked you up! They give you some amazing, *amazing* books. So, my kids, they got to know these books and they got some of those [same] books in their

college courses, so, yeah, it was amazing. ... Absolutely ... I know it had an impact on my kids. So, by this time next year, three of my kids will be college grads. So, yes, I'm a totally different person, and I feel like I'm sounding overly dramatic when I say some of these things, but just to encourage other people around me that you can reach your full potential is so important. Education is such an important tool.

Khadijah's children were in high school, and she thought having philosophy books in the house was "powerful" for her children:

There are always philosophy books around my house now. There are books from the professors, you know, just sitting on the table. [To children]: "Oh, you should read this book. Look what I learned about Nat Turner." So they see what I'm doing. ... Those are some powerful things.

Some parents of young children like Shanté were motivated to read age-appropriate books to their children:

Before that class, I didn't read to him [son]. I wasn't as educated as I am now, and now all that is coming out. I read more, spend more time with him.

Heather, a long-time former course director, explained that these were points she often highlighted when writing grants for her course:

One of the things I often did when I was writing grants to support the course was to point to the research that shows that when parents are in school it absolutely encourages their kids because they have books in the house. I mean that alone, I think the presence of books in the house, the modeling of a parent spending time reading, writing, and discussing, I think that's a big part of it, especially for the younger children. For the older children, what we heard from our students who were parents – which was many – was that it changed the nature of the kinds of conversations they had at home. So, a lot of parents would discuss the questions we were exploring in class with their family members. ... But early on, it was really nice to see the kids, they would be doing their homework in the child care room while their parents were studying. I just think it was a really positive way when you think about the way families spend time together, it was really nice to see that.

Heather confirmed many of the themes that emerged from my interviews and participant observation and, indeed, research does indicate that growing up in a home of scholarly culture provides important academic skills. Using data on academic performance from 42 national samples with 200,144 cases from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and

Development's (OECD) Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), Evans, Kelley, and Sikora (2014) found that the number of books in the home strongly influences children's academic performance, regardless of the nation's ideology, political history, or level of development. The relationship was statistically significant in each of the 42 countries and held strong even after controlling for family influences on educational performance, including parental education, occupation, and wealth. On average, the difference in reading test scores between children from bookless homes and homes with 500 books – which is indicative of a distinct family culture – is equal to an additional 2.2 years in school. Importantly, the gains were larger at the bottom: Each additional book had a greater impact on the achievement of someone who had only a small number of books than it did on the performance of someone from a home with many books. Thus, the “second book and the third book had much larger impacts than the 102<sup>nd</sup> or 103<sup>rd</sup>” (Evans, Kelley, & Sikora, 2014, p. 19). Additionally, the researchers found that books especially help children from economically disadvantaged families. Books increase the academic achievement of children from families of all educational and occupational levels, but the boost is greater for children from families with little education and low-status occupations.

### **Intergenerational Impact**

While Clemente quite often has an intergenerational impact through parents' role modeling and engagement with their children, course directors and students frequently recounted how parents influenced their children to *take* the course, and vice versa, over the years. Cody, a 2006 graduate who did not have children, viewed Clemente as an “investment” because of the impact he perceived it having on families:

It's like there are so many people in the program whose kids are doing better in school and they're more interested as a parent. It's a generational thing. That's why I think it's an investment. ... Absolutely, absolutely a generational impact. Then we've had parents and kids in the same classroom, where parents would take the class and then a few years

later, a kid come through and also take the course. So, definitely, it has a positive impact on the whole family.

In fact, I saw firsthand two rather reluctant daughters in their early twenties enroll in the course because their mother had taken it the year prior – “She basically forced us to do it,” one daughter recalled of their mother. “She talked about it *all the time*: Are you gonna do it? Are you gonna do it?” In short order, however, I watched as both young women became active class participants, and both returned for the second-year Bridge course, which they took alongside their mother.

Lisa, a 2003 graduate, recounted how her son was, in his words, “inspired” by his mother to take the course, and how she interacted differently with her children and grandchildren as a result of Clemente:

My son took the course too. ... My son was the first male in my family, in 22 years, to graduate high school. ... When I went to Clemente it affected how I interacted with my kids. I always knew education was the key, but never thought I would be the one going to college, *seriously*. My son wrote something about me. Rebecca [course director] told me he come to class one day, he was in class, and he got up and he read how ... I inspired him to go back to school because I went back to school. It affected my family greatly. My grandkids now are benefiting from it. My grandson, I’ve had him six weeks now and I have him til he graduates high school. He’s in eighth grade, and he’s doing home school. So just interacting with him, working with him, asking how he’s doing – all that’s because of Clemente.

Sondra, a 2008 graduate, also recalled how her son took the course several years after she graduated. The course boosted her son’s confidence and ignited a desire to continue his education:

So, all of my children, I talked to all of them about the course, and my son has a learning disability. He’s like a fifth grade reading level. He graduated from Clemente, now he works as a custodian at the college. But he is so much more confident and he is so excited, he’s going to pursue his education.

Rebecca, a course director, recounted how an 11-year-old girl attended the Clemente graduation ceremony for her uncle ten years ago, and the simple act of seeing him walk across the stage prompted her to begin thinking about college: “She said that at that moment she

started thinking of college, and so she went through the [Clemente] program when she was 21 and a parent of two.” Graduation ceremonies often came up in interviews as memorable and important events to the graduates. Graduations are typically celebratory, lively affairs – much more than any typical college graduation I’ve ever attended – and are well-attended by graduates’ family, friends, and, often, co-workers. Brenda, a 2004 graduate, recalled how, 12 years prior, course staff “gave my daughter a little shout-out” at graduation. “She came to every class with me and she was six years old at the time,” Brenda said. “They mentioned her name during the graduation because she faithfully came and was a good girl every class.” It was meaningful to Brenda to have her daughter recognized – so meaningful that she recalled it over a decade later – and she attributed her daughter’s course attendance to her pursuit of the liberal arts years later. “She’s taking Liberal Arts now,” Brenda said proudly. “She just graduated from high school last year. She’s in a community college now, and she’s taking humanities. She says Clemente is a big reason for that. She remembers going there as a little girl.”

Similarly, Shalisa, a 2015 graduate in her late twenties, talked to her mother about the class, discussion the group had, and material they covered, and these conversations ultimately influenced her mother to enroll:

- Shalisa: I do not have children. ... I did, however, I talked to my mom and my sister about it. My mother is taking the course this year.
- Charity: Oh, great, OK. Did you talk to them about the content of the course while you were in it?
- Shalisa: I did, and that’s kind of, I guess, what piqued my mother’s interest and so, she’s like, “Well, how often do they do this?” I’m like, they do it every year, and you got to *try*, you know, you got to apply and get in there. Every night coming home after class, of course I had to bring up the subject of whatever we were talking about and ask her opinion and discuss everything with her. So, based on how excited I think I was during the course, I think that was kind of what made her say, “OK, well, I mean, it’s not such a bad thing. You came to like it, so I’ll check it out.”

Shalisa's mother was enrolled at the time of our interview, and while her mother "doesn't have the same love of philosophy that I had," Shalisa added that her mother "really enjoys it [the class]."

And while rarer, some course directors recounted having "mother-daughter teams" in classes, an experience that affects the parent-child relationship in a different way. While I observed two pairs of sisters complete the course together, there were no parent-child teams at the course sites I observed. Alegra, an education director at an organization that hosts a long-time Clemente course, participated in the first year of her agency's course "mostly so I would be able to evaluate the course as we went along," but found that her "mind opened in a very different way" through her participation in the class. She explained that she took the course with her daughter, which was initially an unsettling prospect for Alegra:

We've had teams of moms and daughters in class. Actually, when I took the course, my oldest daughter took the course with me. ... It was really groovy. It was. And I got a little secret that I'm gonna share with you: Initially I was intimidated by the fact that my daughter was going to take the class, and also because my daughter, in school, had been sort of an underachiever. I didn't know if intellectually she had the capacity to do college work, and what I learned was that actually she was really bright, and that she had the goods to go to college and that I should push her to go to college, because this girl has the tools to be able to be successful. ... So doing this [course] together, we bonded more. We realized how differently we viewed the world, and we figured out a way in class to have some sort of a middle ground, and that was like a jumping board for my daughter to move on and continue her education, her college education.

Just as the Clemente student-parents were able to better understand their older children's college experiences and thus bond with them, Alegra came to see her daughter in a new light and the two bonded through the course experience.

## **Conclusion**

It is clear that there is a relationship between participation in the course and positive parenting for the student-parents in this sample. Many parents, particularly single mothers, were

drawn to the course because they saw education as a pathway toward upward mobility and wanted to model being a student to their children. Clemente also served as way for parents to initiate substantive, intellectual conversations with their children. Parents whose children were in humanities-themed child care proudly discussed humanities content with their kids. For other parents and children, their conversations began with a focus on course content but, after the course, shifted to other topics. Parents with college-age children felt that they were finally able to understand the college experience. They were able to relate to their children in a different way – as a “friend” and/or as a fellow “college student,” and they felt comfortable asking their children questions about their studies. In short, most parents felt that Clemente positively impacted their parenting. This is significant because Clemente is not a program specifically designed to increase parental engagement. While a stated goal of many courses is to improve parenting and strengthen parent-child bonds, I observed nothing specifically related to parenting in either of my field site’s curriculum or classroom practices. Just one parent, from a course in the midwest, mentioned that her course “had someone come in and do parenting classes with us.” Through that experience, the mother “learned to be more patient. . . . She [parenting instructor] said we raise our kids like our mothers raised us. So, I try to do a dinner night, a movie night, we take a walk or ride bikes. I just try to take some deep breaths with her. I’m trying to save money for her. College is expensive. And I don’t really know what else but I just want to make sure we have some money saved.” One could speculate that if Clemente courses led parenting workshops in addition to covering course content, parents might learn to be even more engaged with their children.

The impact of parental involvement on children’s academic achievement has been well documented and is readily acknowledged by teachers, administrators, and policy makers to be

one of the key parts of educational reform (Wilder, 2014). Wilder (2014) synthesized the results of nine meta-analyses that examined the impact of parental engagement on student achievement. The results indicated that the relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement was positive, regardless of a definition of parental involvement or the measure of achievement. Furthermore, the findings revealed that the relationship was strongest if parental involvement was defined as parental expectations for academic achievement of their children: “parental expectations reflect parents’ beliefs and attitudes toward school, teachers, subjects, and education in general. As children are likely to harbor similar attitudes and beliefs as their parents, having high parental expectations appears vital for academic achievement of children” (Wilder, 2014, p. 392). All of the parents in this study’s sample who had minor children wanted them to attend college. In fact, when I asked parents if they had particular educational goals for their children, I was often met with, “You mean *other* than going to college?” All of the parents expected that their children would attend postsecondary education. Modeling student behavior was important to many parents, and Clemente represents a first step in that direction.

Community schools might be particularly interested in these outcomes. A driving assumption behind community schools is that expanding the mission of the school to include services for children, their families, and the community will benefit everyone. Indeed, partnerships between schools, parents, and community-based organizations have been found to support student learning, improve schools, and assist families (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Valli, Stefanski, & Jacobson, 2014; Walsh et al., 2014). Partnerships with parents often take the form of continuing education for parents through GED, ESL, or job preparation classes; parenting support and workshops; and employment and volunteer programs within the school. Although there are community schools, like the Harlem Children’s Zone, which offer college-level

humanities courses to students through the Bard Early College Program, I am not aware of a community school that offers a Clemente course to *parents*. As schools seek to forge partnerships with parents and meet community needs, they might explore parental education programs that go beyond the typical adult basic education, ESL, and computer literacy courses.

The following excerpt from my interview with Alejandra, who graduated from Clemente about 10 years ago and is now a practicing social worker with an MSW from a Research I institution, sums up the potential Clemente has to affect change among its students-parents. She said she had “struggled with reading and writing a good portion” of her life and “was always behind.” When Alejandra entered the course, she “kind of felt stupid,” which is in stark contrast to how she sees herself now:

Alejandra: They [children] were little, they were like 4 and 5. ... I think it made me dream more for what I can do for me and my kids. It made me start to think, like, I don't always have to work a part-time job or I don't always have to be in a dead-end job. It made me want to dream more and made me want to reach for higher things. At the time that I was going to Clemente, I had three jobs: I was a bartender, I worked at a call center, and I worked at Target. It was just hard with these two girls, but now I live a totally different life.

Charity: How would you describe yourself right now?

Alejandra: I would say that I have pretty much close to perfect life, I mean I bought a brand new house. ... I drive a brand new car, like *literally* brand new, like 2015. The house that I bought is a three-minute drive to my job, is a five-minute drive to reach the school. I mean, I have everything that I could possible dream for. We're going on vacation. I'm taking my kids to Santo Domingo to visit my family. I mean all of this, I swear to God, all of this would not have happened had I not went to Clemente.

Charity: That's big.

Alejandra: I would not have my dream job, my dream house, and my dream car. My kids wouldn't be wanting to be in a higher education. My daughters are in academic programs at school. I mean, it was like a huge snowball effect. It literally started from nothing, just started from my mom telling me, “You need to join this Clemente class.”

Alejandra's success is an outlier, but her enthusiasm for the course and her belief that Clemente was in large part responsible for her success, and the success of her children, were common refrains among student-parents in the sample. The fact that Alejandra went from struggling to read and write in English to living "pretty much close to the perfect life" indicates the potential of Clemente to affect positive change in families' lives.

## CHAPTER 8: Limitations, Suggestions, Implications

“Our program helps with inner poverty. It helps students feel richer and more worthy but it doesn’t, at least not on an immediate level, it doesn’t fix the on-the-ground poverty that they are facing day to day.”

– *Rebecca, course director*

“Marcus [history instructor] and I, we were talking about ... what’s going to be the end result of this course. ... A lot of us were looking at the course, like, leading directly into something. I forgot what they call that, exactly the word for it, but he told us, ‘This can lead anywhere you want it to lead,’ and it can, it literally can. So, it was worth every minute of it.”

– *Chadwick, 2014 graduate, African American, age 51*

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Through this study, I sought to better understand students’ experiences in Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses. It is clear that students in the sample, including drop-outs, valued the Clemente experience; *every* interviewee had something positive to say about the course and the vast majority were eager to share their feelings. Through 150 interviews with 116 individuals, two years of participant observation, and combing through numerous Facebook posts, student newsletters, and course websites, I am confident in concluding that there appears to be a relationship between students’ course participation and their engagement as democratic citizens and parents. While the experience is not “transformative” or “enlightening” for every student, for students in the sample, it was always a positive experience in some form. *Every* student interviewed, including drop-outs, said they would recommend the course to others, and many already had.

Many students gain confidence in self-expression, begin to think critically and ask questions, and work to improve the direction of their life and community, and they attribute such gains to the course. Student-parents, particularly mothers, come to see themselves as role models, relate more closely to their children, and engage in more substantive conversations with them. Course participation appears to affect other domains as well. Students gain a deep

appreciation for the humanities and see a place for it in low-income communities; they acquire dominant cultural capital, which they *value* and which gives them a sense of belonging; and they become a part of an intellectual and social community in the classroom and form bonds across difference. These changes are fostered in part by the curriculum itself – subjects that for centuries have sought to enlighten – but also through the pedagogical strategies and support offered by Clemente staff. Because there is no prescribed curriculum, classes are diverse in content and differ from one site to another. After talking with students at sites across the US, it became clear that regardless of the location of the course, the humanities curriculum pushes students to critically reflect on the human condition generally and their place in the world specifically. Students uniformly praise instruction that is problem-posing and dialogic in nature and are openly critical of unprepared, disorganized, and/or lecture-prone instructors. Socratic-style instruction engages students and makes them feel “respected,” “valued,” and “heard.”

### **Limitations**

As is the case with all studies, this dissertation has limitations. I initially conceived of the project as an ethnographic study of two discrete courses; I would spend a year with one course and interview those students and staff, followed by a second year with another course where I would interview those students and staff. Towards the beginning of my second year, however, I realized I needed to more actively seek negative cases. I began to hear similar responses from students, and nearly everything they had to say about the course was positive. While this could be viewed as nearing “saturation,” the lack of divergent experiences worried me: Who was I missing? It was at that point that I decided to expand the sample to include graduates and drop-outs from locations across the US.

**Self-Selection of Study Sample.** But because there is no national database of Clemente

alumni on which I could draw for a random sample, I was dependent on course directors to spread the word about my project to their current and former students, and I was dependent on those individuals to contact me. The current and former students who contacted me did so because they *wanted* to. Perhaps respondents wanted the gift card, but I suspect more often it was because they simply wanted to share their experiences. So, current and former students who learned of my project were a part of courses that were organized enough to disseminate information, whether through an alumni email list or an in-class announcement, and the individuals who responded were in a position to receive the announcement and had a way to contact me. It's possible that those who selected into interviews were different in important ways from those who did not, which could lead to the sample not being representative of the Clemente population as a whole. To this point, Sterba and Foster (2008) argue that "in most instances, it is highly unlikely that sampling units self-select into or out of a sample for reasons completely independent of the outcome of interest" (p. 807).

It was especially difficult to find drop-outs to talk with. Manuel, the director of an organization responsible for financial and administrative support for its state's Clemente courses, summarized the difficulty in tracking down former students; they are highly mobile and some courses don't have adequate record keeping to begin with. "We try to keep track of them but, as you might imagine, the working poor move a lot," he said. "They move *a lot*, so keeping track of people's email addresses and mailing addresses is really hard, and we don't do a great job of keeping track of that stuff." The drop-outs with whom I spoke left courses in which I'd been a participant observer, and they reported leaving due to personal reasons (e.g., employment, elder care, obligations with their children), not because of the course itself. This study is missing the voices of those who left because of something in or about the course. One class in which I was a

participant observer had a subpar teacher who was often ill-prepared and, on one occasion, neglected to come to class altogether. Some students referenced this teacher in their post-graduation interviews, and I speculate that some students may have dropped out due to that class specifically, though no one said so explicitly. Of the drop-outs I interviewed, none said they left for reasons directly related to the course such as teaching, content, or personnel.

I wrestled with the concept of self-selection from the beginning to the end of this project. Curious about who selects into and persists in Clemente, I asked students who stayed if they felt they were any different from those who'd left the course or didn't sign up at all. Three-quarters of students said yes, they *did* think they were different. They were more "engaged" and "committed" than those who'd dropped out:

Duke: Yeah, I do [think I'm different]. I think that those people don't have it in mind to get anything tangible from the course. I think they might've been coming because it sounded like a great idea without thinking it through, what they would have to put into it to get something out of it. They obviously didn't want much out of it, so they didn't feel they needed to continue to come.

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Lenore: Yes, there are differences. I'm not sure why those persons would have started and dropped out. I'm not sure of their particular situation, but I'm driven and that's why I meant it's different because I'm trying to make my situation better. So, regardless of, you know, whatever obstacles may come my way, I try to ensure that I'm there for every class.

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Tameka: I didn't believe that we were that different but, in the end, it actually turns out I guess I was a little different, because no matter what – *I mean no matter what the obstacles were* – I would get there. I made it a point to get there. I don't care if I had to walk, I would get there, because that, I was motivated. I was determined to finish it. I wanted to see it through. I loved my classes. I loved the material they were covering and the experiences of the class, and the, I cannot forget the community.

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Tim: Yes, I was more, I think I was more engaged. ... I wanted to complete my commitment. I mean, it was a contract that we signed off on, and I also didn't want to let my professors down. Because, you know, I would see some of these professors come in from their regular jobs to come teach at Clemente and they looked *exhausted*.

Students who didn't think they were different were in the minority and typically highlighted the fact that life can be complicated, and unforeseen circumstances can stop *anyone* from completing the course:

Anita: No, I think that sometimes life becomes very complicated and, of course, during that time I had life and there were times when I felt like I couldn't come or make it. I think that sometimes circumstances just don't allow what you need to complete the course. Different people are in different places in their lives I think. I think some people just had more complicated lifestyles than I do. I just think that sometimes it's just that simple. I believe I have support, I have a great support system at home. I drive, some don't, they didn't live close by. Some were, like, looking for work and finding jobs ... So, I didn't have those kind of problems that would have prevented me from Clemente class.

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Gloria: I don't think I'm different at all. I just think that maybe their life, what they go through in their lives doesn't allow them the flexibility to be there. The people that I have seen that came and the ones that didn't come back, for the little bit of time that they was there, they seemed generally interested in the course and taking it seriously, but, I guess, just had issues to deal with. But I don't think I'm different at all, no.

Ann-Marie, a 2016 graduate currently enrolled in a second-year Bridge course, mentioned a classmate who was a mother of three and who dropped out of the course after about a month. Ann-Marie explained that she understood how difficult life can get – “We go through stuff,” she said – but she ended her response by highlighting how “determined” she was to persist in the course:

I'm not different. I don't think I'm different from them. So, the simple fact that we go through stuff. ... I'm going to call one person [who quit]. ... I haven't seen her in a while and she really touched me. She was very passionate and I'm not sure what's going on or

why I haven't seen her, but I understand she has a family also and she also has a history based on what she shared with us in the class. I really don't know why she didn't continue. So, I don't think I'm different, but I know things keep us away. But I was determined not to miss any day.

**Self-Selection of Clemente Population.** The study's sample was largely self-selected and Clemente courses' student population as a whole is self-selected. Just as students volunteered to be interviewed, they *elected* to join the course, and individuals who enroll in Clemente courses may be different from those who do not. Many students in the sample reported feeling more confident and more analytical after the course; they felt that they'd gained an improved sense of control and saw their relationships with their children change for the better, for example, but it's possible that students who are community-focused, family-driven, and curious may self-select into these courses. If that's the case, post-Clemente "gains" may be indicative of the students' pre-existing characteristics rather than the Clemente experience per se. The non-random assignment of participants also limits the degree to which conclusions about Clemente generalize from students who opt-in to the course to students who may opt-out.

Course directors are aware of the issue of self-selection into Clemente. At their annual meetings, they talked at length about recruiting and retaining students, and the topic was raised in interviews as well. Leigh, a course director for nine years, explained that despite her long tenure, she was still unsure how to gauge who would be a "good fit" for the class:

So, this doesn't speak to this [self-selection] directly but it's probably related to it. One of the things that we find mystifying and hard to figure out is, like, how to determine who is a good fit for the class. Despite the fact that I'm in my ninth year of doing this and I've interviewed hundreds of applicants, still when I look at the class that I'm in right now, there are people that I was really unsure about [admitting]. I mostly took them because there was space in the class. ... There are people I was really sure about who have been problems in the classroom. Then in one case we had to actually *remove* someone from the class. It's like, then this year 30% of our applicants never responded to our outreach for an interview. They applied and then they essentially failed – selected themselves out – by not pursuing what they had applied for, and we don't have any idea what that was about.

Robert, a course director who has been involved with Clemente for over 15 years, was similarly unsure of what “type” of person enrolled in the course:

So, I will tell you, yeah, I think there is a ton of self-selection among the students. I mean, we do get great people, clearly the people who value education. ... The people that we get, it's a particular subset. I would love to know what that subset is exactly, like if it could be characterized in some way. If it were parents concerned with their kids' education, then we could put more fliers in the local school. Or, if it's just something about self-improvement, we can put more fliers in the gyms or something like that. But definitely there is self-selection. ... Yeah, I mean the whole process is still a real mystery to me.

Similarly, Jason, an instructor for just a few years, was surprised by the students who persisted:

I think that in a hindsight you can always see why a student left, it's clear why they left. But in hindsight it's never clear why a student persisted. ... Each year I was really surprised by who went through, who made it all the way through and seemed to get a lot out of it and who didn't. ... I think that's what's neat about the course in some ways. It creates a space in which that kind of unpredictability can happen. ... It's really hard to predict and some of that has to do with the chemistry in the classroom. It has to do with [students'] life circumstances. So, I think it's self-selected a little bit more for students who feel like this is going to have some value to them.

Clemente attracts a diverse group, especially in terms of age, life experience, and education, who enroll for a variety of reasons, and I don't think it's possible to put a fine point on the “subset” of low-income adults who select into Clemente. I wondered, though, if those who selected into the course had traits in common. I asked students in interviews to describe themselves, and their answers typically fell into one or more of four categories: (1) determined/ambitious, (2) caring, (3) intelligent/opinionated, and (4) open-minded. Students never used just one word to describe themselves; their descriptions crossed categories. For example, Thiago's description of himself encompassed three of the four categories: “As a person, I would describe myself as determined, smart, and compassionate.” Well over half of the students in the sample described themselves as “determined,” “ambitious,” “persistent,” and “motivated.” For example:

Adelaide: That's a good question, I was speaking to a group of friends and I said,

“You know what? I’m in a good place,” meaning I know what I want. I know where I’m going. I know what my goals are. ... I’m focused and determined.

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Arnaud: I work hard and I’m very persistent. I don’t give up.

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Gloria: I would say highly motivated, strongly focused, and just eager to succeed.

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Janiece: Well, I’m very ambitious. I’m hard working. I’m reliable. I’m responsible, and I enjoy learning new things.

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Luciana: OK, I guess at this point I’m very driven, ambitious. So, like, I have a lot of goals that I would like to achieve, and right now I’m at the point in my life where I’m going for it. So, I’m driven. ... Right now, I’m making a plan and I’m executing that plan.

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Mark: I’m relentless ... I tend to be a bit of a perfectionist. ... I never give up on something. I usually do it to the very end, whatever that may be. Innovative, very open minded.

Over half of the students also described themselves as caring and compassionate:

Phillip: Caring, helpful. I believe in education, believe in mentoring others younger than me and even older.

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Tiana: I’m free-hearted, free-spirited. ... I just say what I think in my mind. ... I’m caring. I love the children. I never wanted any, but I’ve always had a love for the children.

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Melissa: I’m a “doer” type of person who likes to make sure the tasks, you know, the tasks are done, done through to completion as best as possible depending on the situation. I help people. I’m usually, I’m the one that

helps people usually when they need help. ... Yeah, I just, you know, I try to help people as much as I can.

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Ornella: I think I'm pretty friendly. I'm very passionate about life, excited about life, considering the things I've been through in life and the things that had knocked me down a few times that I have been able to get back up with time. I feel pretty proud of myself that I have been able to do that. I feel a responsibility to not only do for myself, but to encourage others to do the same thing in life. Without patting myself too much on the back, I think other people would say the same thing about me.

About a quarter of students also characterized themselves as intelligent and opinionated. Some students, like Luisa and Tisha, 2016 graduates in their sixties and twenties respectively, emphasized qualities of persistence *and* intelligence, while Florence and Shalisa, 2015 graduates also in their sixties and twenties respectively, described themselves as "opinionated":

Luisa: I think I'm a very, very smart person. I'm a proactive person. I never stay down, and when I fall off, I get back up and keep it moving.

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Tisha: Confident, motivated, hungry, loved, supported, definitely. I'd call myself intelligent.

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Florence: Kind, nosy, opinionated, outspoken, fun to be around. I love to learn.

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Shalisa: Opinionated, outspoken, friendly, maybe a little bit charming, but I guess that depends on who you are. ... I'm a hardworking, intelligent individual. I'm honest and a little bit of a procrastinator – that's the reason I haven't gone back to school even though I probably could have.

Finally, about a quarter of students, like Lola, Aurora, and Chadwick, emphasized being open-minded:

Aurora: I am a person with my mind wide open.

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Chadwick: Oh, right now I'm open-minded and optimistic, and that hasn't always been the case. I try to keep my eyes open, my ears open for opportunities.

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Lola: Let's see, I'm open-minded, friendly, just trying to make it better for my family. I'm goal driven.

Graduates' perceptions that they were more "goal driven," "determined" and "hungry" than those who quit or didn't enroll, coupled with their enthusiasm and passion, seem to point to the concept of grit – "trait-level perseverance and passion for long-term goals" (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009, p. 66). Grit is the subject of several studies which determined that perseverance and passion may be as important as intelligence in determining one's success. Grit has been found to predict achievement and ability to persevere across a variety of domains (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Controlling for SAT scores (as a proxy for innate intelligence), grit in Ivy League undergraduates was associated with higher GPAs, retention among two classes of United States Military Academy and West Point cadets, ranking of Scripps National Spelling Bee contestants, and persistence of novice teachers in a low-income school district (Duckworth et al., 2007; Robertson-Kraft & Duckworth, 2014). Gritty adults have been found to achieve higher levels of education and make fewer career changes than their less gritty counterparts (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Perseverance in academic settings is affected by students' personality, academic skills, learning strategies, and mindset (Farrington et al., 2012). Carol Dweck (2006) argues that there are two mindsets from which people operate – a fixed mindset and a growth mindset. With a fixed mindset, individuals believe that intelligence, talent, or character are inherent and cannot be altered. Individuals with a growth mindset believe that "anyone can change and grow through

application and experience” (Dweck, 2006, p. 7). Echoing the concept of grit, Dweck (2006) argues that the hallmark of the growth mindset is “the passion for stretching yourself and sticking to it, even when [things] are not going well. ... This is the mindset that allows people to thrive during some of the most challenging times in their lives” (p. 7). An investigation into the grittiness and mindsets of Clemente students is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the issues of self-selection and attrition may be tied to these concepts and may be worthy of further research. How important *are* grit and a growth mindset to students’ success in Clemente?

This notion of learner identity or mindset was brought up at an annual Clemente directors’ meeting and is something that directors and instructors also mentioned in interviews: “I don’t think Clemente is doing enough to cultivate a growth mindset [in students],” one instructor argued at the annual meeting. “The growth mindset is a clear outcome. We should be asking, ‘Does it [mindset] grow and transform, and how can we foster that as well?’” A long-time course director explained that a master’s degree student recently used their course as the subject of her “capstone project,” which examined the characteristics of successful students in the course. Data were drawn in part from observation of the course’s annual application screening and prospective student interviews, as well as randomly selected records of 25 students who had completed the program (records included applications with essays and staff notes from the interviews and end-of-course conferences). The graduate student concluded that 85% of students in the sample possessed a growth mindset (Vurpillat, 2015). In an interview, the course director explained the student’s project and its implications:

She used our program as a capstone project and looked at characteristics of successful students and, like, went through all of our files and tried to compare grades and attendance and things like that to applications and application scoring, all of these different things. And one of the things she ended up talking about a lot in her report was this idea of mindset, which is really, like, a buzzword in education right now. ... I’ve been thinking since she basically argued that we should have a way of measuring or

somehow evaluating mindset in our process. Because the students – I think this is part of self-selection too – because the students who have a growth mindset – you see this all the time in the classroom – people with *huge* barriers that you think “How in the world is this person possibly getting here?” but that person just really believes in learning and growing and can make it happen. So, she argued for that, but ... we were talking about this in the advisory committee and there was one of our graduates on that committee. She was saying like, “Well, I don’t know cuz sometimes people come in and they don’t have that mindset, but being in the classroom in some ways *creates* it for them, or allows them to create it for themselves.” So, I don’t know. I think all of that is just so slippery.

There are valid ways to measure grit (e.g., Duckworth and colleagues’ grit scales) and there are ways to determine and change one’s mindset. Obviously, having a student complete a measure of either on their first day of Clemente is intrusive and a generally *bad* idea, but questions can be worked into applications and interviews which might illuminate these traits, or the lack thereof, in prospective students. For instance, the application and interview could be used as a “pre-test” that could be tied to a “post-test” in the form of an exit interview or end-of-course survey. Part of what many students love about Clemente is the classroom diversity – “We were all so different, but we came together and respected each other,” as one student said – so to use a grit scale or a mindset measure as a vetting instrument seems unwise. A classroom of gritty students with growth mindsets may be more likely to persist, but it excludes the students who might be less gritty or have more fixed mindsets but who could, quite possibly, be changed by the course.

**Attrition.** Determining what sort of students persist in Clemente is important because attrition is a challenge in many courses. Nationally, courses experience a completion rate of “around 30, 40% something like that, sometimes higher” (personal communication, February 26, 2016). This attrition rate is similar to community colleges’, a point directors and faculty often mention. According to the US Department of Education and the National Student Clearinghouse, the six-year completion rate for all community college students is 39% and 26.6% for part-time students (Juskiewicz, 2015). Jason, an art history instructor, suggested that

because Clemente courses often don't have the resources to conduct extensive follow-up with drop-outs, we are left with feedback from those who persisted:

Something I worry about is that sometimes we take the, we hear the feedback of the most vocal students and we leave the ones who had to drop out of the program or who've gone through it but could have gotten more out of it. But we don't know that because we've never sort of asked them, but I just think in terms of this whole feedback loop to the faculty and everything else, it would be good to have more of a sense of what that kind of midrange student experience is.

Rachel, a Clemente staff member, commented on a course that experienced significant attrition, beginning with about 30 students and graduating just six. She, like Jason, was concerned with not having data from the drop-outs:

What about the 25 other students that are gone?! I wonder what their experience was like, who knows? It may have just been, like, maybe they got a job and it may have been, I'm not saying that, I don't know, that's all I'm saying because *we don't know*, because *no one asked*.

Rico, a 2015 Clemente graduate, had been a student in a class where just 20% graduated. "Are they keeping some kind of, like, metrics, spreadsheets?" he asked during our interview. He argued that the course director needed to collect "some data that can somehow demonstrate to you who are you reaching out to or who are you *not* reaching out to and where is the drop off? Who applies? Who doesn't apply? Why are they dropping? Are you keeping tabs on them? ... If that information is not being collected, then I just feel like we're just talking to the wall." He conceded that it takes resources to track students but advocated a "more institutionalized way of doing things. But if people are dropping, why are they dropping? Why did they lose interest? What were they not getting that could have been provided? Was it money? Was it finances? Was it employment? Was it health? Was it potentially mental challenges? Was it transportation issues? I mean, was it economics?"

Rico's questions speak to the many barriers to persistence that non-traditional adult

learners often face. Cross (1981) suggests a taxonomy of barriers that moves from the individual level to the social: dispositional or psychological (anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, depression, feeling too old to learn), situational (cost, lack of time, lack of child care, transportation), and institutional (scheduling, admissions requirements, location). Clemente works to break down many situational and institutional barriers, and students seem to overcome some dispositional barriers through the experience. Perhaps as important as the kinds of barriers that non-traditional adult learners face is the cumulative effect of more than one barrier. Cross (1981) stressed that students' difficulty starting or finishing educational projects increases with the number of barriers they experience. Multiple barriers could very well contribute to nonparticipation and attrition in Clemente; what the barriers are and how they operate are areas worthy of further research. Jeremy, a course director, raised an interesting point when he recounted admitting a student who he was concerned would not persist in the course and who ultimately did not. Although the student attended five or so sessions, Jeremy was quite certain the experience had been impactful and would rather admit those kind of students than, say, students who would likely complete the course but on whom the experience may not have a profound impact:

I think that even for some students who only are with us for a month or two, the impact can be tremendous. We have to make some tough admissions decisions and, in some ways, I would rather admit someone who doesn't complete but takes more away from a month or two than I would admit someone who will in fact complete but doesn't take much away from the experience. It can be tough to kind of make some of those calls but, for example, we had a student that we admitted this year – very young, just graduated from high school, admitted to the local branch of the state university this year, lives in one of the biggest housing projects in the city, had been mentored by one of our graduates from last year. And in, I would say, almost *defiance* of larger national trends given his personal situation, [he] declared from day one that he would be a history major at the ... university. Now, I was concerned about his ability to deal with the first semester of his freshmen year and take the [Clemente] class concurrently, but I knew that we were leading with the US history section of the course. I felt that even if he only attended 4 or 5 of the sessions that that would give him a different kind of basis for the work that he would then proceed to do as an undergraduate than if we just rejected him outright. So, we admitted him and, in fact, he attended 4 or 5 sessions and then of course

things got busy and he dropped the course. Was it impactful for him? I believe that it was.

Voices of drop-outs like the one Jeremy speaks of are rarely heard, yet are important in understanding why students leave the course, how Clemente can better support students, and what aspects of the course are, or aren't, impactful while they're there.

### **Suggestions**

Those who persist in the course are *overwhelmingly* positive in their reviews of it, and one of the most challenging aspects of the interview process was getting participants to provide suggestions for, or criticisms of, the program. On a classroom level, course directors and instructors can't ever be too organized, too clear, or too thorough in their assignments, expectations, and explanations. We, as academics, often take for granted that others understand the concept of a syllabus. They don't. As a participant observer, students called, texted, and asked me face-to-face *countless* times for clarification on class dates and assignments. Sitting among the students, I saw their disorganized binders exploding with papers; they didn't know what to throw away and what to keep, what to bring to class and what to leave at home. Students need guidance on how to be students – how to organize a binder, how to read a syllabus, where to look for answers to common questions like when something is due. Administrative disorganization and lack of clarity frustrate and confuse students. For example, Janelle, a 2016 graduate in her forties, explained that it grew increasingly difficult for her to manage readings and assignments because of unclear expectations from professors and general disorganization on the part of program administrators. Janelle and I spoke at the end of the school year, and even then, she was still unsure of what she had left to finish in order to earn credit for the course:

Yeah, and it was sometimes unclear what they [instructors] were requesting, that's what I had the hardest time trying to figure out: assignments. ... I can't even tell you, like, even now, the stuff that I have to finish. I must have made photocopies of things 10 times

because I couldn't keep track. A lot of stuff didn't have page numbers, so I couldn't follow what I was copying. ... So, I keep copying it and then now I have all these copies of stuff that I first have to organize. ... This could have been easier, like an easier way to organize.

Similarly, Al, also a 2016 graduate, felt that the biggest weakness of the course was losing “control” of the syllabus. Class dates shifted so frequently during the second half of the year that students didn't know what class they were coming to on any given night and, thus, were frequently unprepared:

I'd say the only weakness of the class is more of an administrative thing. I felt that once we lost control of the syllabus, that's when I lost control of order. I hate admitting to that, but I tend to be very OCD, and I put things in a certain way because that's the best way for me to learn. But come spring semester when we realized we no longer had a syllabus, it was hard for me to prepare and I constantly had to check my email to see if we had any readings to do for the next class. That's when it got difficult, but again that was more an administrative thing, and I really couldn't complain. I couldn't complain because first of all, these professors aren't being paid to do this. They are doing this out of the mercy of their good soul. You know what, I just had to accept it for what it was. Once I took that perspective, I was fine with it. I let go a little bit. I didn't feel like I had to be in total control anymore.

Al also gets at something that came up a few times during interviews: a hesitation to be critical because the course was free. Al states that he “couldn't complain” because the instructors were working for free. Instructors at Al's site were, in fact, paid but, even so, he seems to suggest that he couldn't be *too* critical of the course because of the “good soul[s]” keeping it afloat.

To this point, Roger, a 2016 graduate, said somewhat jokingly that the main “con” of the course was a lack of nearby parking. Like Al, Roger suggests that students shouldn't have “anything negative to say” about Clemente because it's free, and it would be “ungrateful” to criticize the program:

I've had so much fun with this group in this program. I don't have anything negative to say about it. I really don't, and the people that do, point them out to me so I can say something to them and see what their issue is. I mean, because you gotta think about it: an education is expensive nowadays and you are getting it *free*. How ungrateful could you really be? Like, at the end of the day, when you put it into perspective about getting

your needs met, you have bills, you have to pay rent, mortgage, whatever it is, and this is something that isn't going to take food off your table, take the roof from over your head. I don't understand where they can say that something is wrong.

Perhaps the lack of pointed criticism is not due to students' overwhelmingly positive experiences but, instead, to their reluctance to "complain" about something that was provided to them gratis. I kept this alternative explanation in mind during interviews and urged interviewees to think about "suggestions" if "criticisms" seemed too harsh to them. Too, some interviewees were years away from their Clemente experience. I relied on respondents' memories of the class, but memory is fallible and prone to inaccuracy (Tourangeau, Rips, & Rasinski, 2000). I am as confident as I can be that interviewees were candid and truthful with me. Answers were consistent across cohorts and course sites and respondents, who were guaranteed confidentiality, had nothing to gain by sugarcoating negative aspects of the course. They often shared intimate details about their life histories and recounted stories of substance abuse, mental illness, and violence, for example. It seems unlikely to me that a respondent would feel comfortable enough during the interview to disclose such personal information but would be unwilling to offer criticism of the course.

In addition to suggestions for better course organization, several students (and instructors) suggested "laptops or the ability to do work on laptops." "We did a lot of *written* work," one student said, "writing everything and then trying to keep up with all the paperwork and stuff like that." One student showed me a 10-page philosophy paper she'd painstakingly typed out *on her phone*. An instructor argued that students' lack of technology contributes to a "digital divide" and limits the materials she can assign:

So, they don't have a laptop, so they can't type the thing [assignment] or they have to type it at some weird place or whatever, and then the printer doesn't work. You know, 15 other things, and they can't email it because they don't know how to attach, blah, blah, blah, all of that. The other thing is, it really restricts the kind of materials you can give

them. I teach at the university level. I assign podcasts, E-books, journals, all kinds of stuff. They [Clemente students] can't do that. ... They're not having the access to what I would call the current stuff.

Other suggestions included more amenable class locations, where temperature can be regulated, there is ample space, and students feel comfortable and welcomed; more aggressive advertising; and less leniency on the part of Clemente staff. On the latter point, a graduate remarked:

So, I think it was kind of a little bit enabling us. When you get in college it's not like that at all. ... There's not going to be a teacher holding your hand, and that's what they somewhat did there – hold our hands.

Similarly, other students felt that staff were “way too accepting of latenesses and absences” and staff were “understanding of people's situations, which is good, but sometimes I don't need you [staff] to say, ‘It's OK you don't have your paper done.’ Sometimes I need you to say, ‘*Why* don't you have your paper done?’ or ‘I need you to get this paper done.’ A lot of us need a kick in the ass, you know?” Likewise, a 2015 graduate felt like directors and instructors were *too* tolerant of some students:

Clemente is very open, meaning they are tolerant of people being late, being unprepared, having different schedules. They are tolerant to a fault. If you have the opportunity to get involved, the least you can do is show up consistently and on time. I missed *one* class last year. More people should show commitment. People laid out money for this course.

Indeed, there seems to be a fine line between compassion for students' difficult lives and lowered expectations. Students may be unprepared for a class because of work or family obligations, for example, but I've seen firsthand many students who simply stopped keeping up with the readings because it became clear to them that there would be no repercussions. Professors seemed generally uncomfortable admonishing the Clemente students and I think this is due, in part, to the power imbalance the instructors feel. They are largely white, highly educated, and middle-upper class while the class is often low-income, racial minorities with erratic education histories.

I observed this leniency at both course sites and at both sites it snowballed to a point

where a significant portion of the class was not prepared for class and the instructor grew frustrated, though it could have been prevented by reiterating expectations and *continuously* holding students to high standards. In a history class, when the instructor realized the majority of the class had not read the legal opinions he assigned – which he later conceded were probably too difficult for them to comprehend – he told the class he was going to lecture because “when you don’t do the readings, it makes it really hard to teach.” In a literature class, the instructor had let it slide when some students came to class unprepared, and many students stopped doing the readings or merely skimmed them before class. This snowballed until one day when only a couple students had done any of the required reading for the evening. Excerpts from my field notes reveal the idea of being “tolerant to a fault” (Note: Martin or M is the literature professor and bracketed [text] are my personal thoughts typed in real time.)

M: *Don Quixote*, did you like it?

Silence.

M: Let’s start with *King Arthur*, what’s your reaction?

Al: It was difficult understanding it when, as a kid, you grow up watching the cartoons and the movies. It seemed ... not as romantic. ... It was enlightening for me reading, because it gave me a different perspective. ...

Roger: I was equating this with Excalibur.

M: *It is*.

Al turns around and says “it is” at the same time as Martin. [Did Roger actually read this? I am thinking not.] ...

M: Who is Arthur and how did he come into being?

Silence.

M: How did Arthur get born?

Roger: He was a commoner. ...

M: *No*, he wasn’t. [If I was teaching, I’d be getting frustrated by this point.]

Roger: Do tell, do tell.

M: I’m not doing all the work, *you* were supposed to have read this. Who read this?

Al raises his hand. Martin asks if Al was the only one. Gloria says she read some of it but she can’t remember. “I can’t retain,” she says quietly.

Natasha: I was one of the people who read some of it but it was kinda hard for me to get through it.

Martin directs the class to how the story begins and basically starts telling the story.

[What needs to happen here is that students must be reminded at the end of every class not only what’s due for this class but what class is the next day and what’s due/what

should be read. They are not reading, looking at their calendars, etc.]

Later in that same class, Professor Martin moved to another text and, as he later said to me,

“blew up” when he realized students had not read that one either:

Martin asks a question about what Don Quixote does with his armor. Someone says “sleep in it.” [Wrong answer.]

M: Who read this?

Gloria kind of mumbles that she did. No one raises their hand or emphatically says yes. M goes on about how students *have* to do the readings, gets very serious with them, says the professors work hard to prepare lessons for you.

M: What are you learning if you’re not reading? [He asks this a couple times.]

Jimena says something inaudible. [She is seated right in front of him.]

M: You want to hear me read. I’m not here to *entertain* you, Jimena, I’m here to *teach* you.

Jimena whispers “sorry” and looks away.

M: This course is for college credit. You don’t *deserve* college credit. You don’t! Shame on you. I begged you to do the readings in our last literature class, and I’m going to beg you again – you *have* to do the readings. I know they’re hard. ... You’re not supposed to understand everything. College students don’t understand everything. And we discuss it here, then you go back to the readings and say, “Oh OK, I get it now.”

M says these were hard for him when he first read them.

Jimena: “Nuh-uh, you were born smart.” [Fixed mindset.]

M: No, I wasn’t. I was like you. College was very hard for me. ...

[This was a much-needed talk to them. I only would have asked them explicitly, “Why are you *not* reading?” Or, had them write something about why they’re not doing it, and then turn it in *in class, right now*. I think in general, I would have them produce more written work related to the texts, even if in-class.]

I talked about this evening with many students and they all felt it was “deserved” and that they “needed that.” Martin, the literature instructor, told me that some students had come to him after class to “thank” him for the admonishment, which they “respected.” As an educator, I felt it was a long time coming, but as a researcher, I kept my opinion to myself. During my interview with Martin, he explained that the cohort that year seemed to be “more highly educated and had stronger reading and writing skills” than previous classes. “We had higher expectations and that’s why I blew up,” he said. “There was no excuse. We didn’t take them off the street, they were coming from jobs, they were all responsible people.” From that evening onward, students

were visibly more prepared, which Martin noted: “And you saw that they were fully prepared for the next class after I blew up at them, I think it was *Candide*.” During the interview, I relayed an anecdote to Martin; I told him I had observed a student stand up in a class on Tuesday and remind her classmates to complete the readings for Thursday’s literature class – the first since the “blow up”: “We have to do the readings next time, guys!” she said. Martin laughed. “Small victories before we win the war,” he said. All of this is to say that there is merit in some students’ observations of staff’s “tolerance to a fault” and in some students’ suggestions that professors hold them accountable. Professors might do well to reflect on their approach to students’ preparedness and how best to toe the line between compassion and leniency. Few students in the sample lamented the reading load, which suggests that it may in fact be reasonable but students must be continuously reminded and encouraged to do it.

Most common, however, were suggestions that focused on how much the student valued the course and the community it fostered. Time and again, students mentioned wanting to keep in touch with their classmates and participate in alumni events. They suggested outings to cultural events and picnics, as well as humanities courses specifically for alumni. Some course sites have the resources to employ alumni as tutors, counselors, and case workers, for example; some have advisory committees on which alumni may serve; and some bring alumni in as guest speakers. But above all, students yearned for the “community” they’d been a part of in the classroom. One long-time course director felt immense pressure running a Clemente course. “Students can grow resentful that we can’t stay in their lives,” she said. “They hunger for contact and for continuing” as a learning community. She continued:

It’s also an enormous responsibility to start a Clemente course, then to run out of money and to not be able to do, say, a Bridge program the second year. So, these students will say, “Well, this is all very good, but now where are we? I don’t have those four hours a week which made me feel part of the world. My world has been shrunk again now that

the course is over.”

The most often-repeated suggestion was that the course be “longer,” “more hours,” and/or “more months.” Students who were at sites without a second-year Bridge course suggested an additional course. This speaks to students’ hunger for learning but also to their yearning for intellectual and social community. Several students wanted Clemente to be a full-service university, with its own building and dedicated instructors. Parents also suggested not only that their children be involved in humanities-themed child care, but several argued that the Clemente course should be “mandated” in middle and high school. Students frequently suggested some aspect of expansion of the course:

“It would be a college, a free college.”

“I am seeing our own building with classrooms, full-time teachers.”

“I would love, you know, what my dream would be is that it’ll be part of the high school curriculum, before you graduate. I think that that particular course [Clemente] should be mandated. ... It should be part of the school’s curriculum. You hear about all the violence, the things that are going on in our city? It seems to me if something like that was in place in the curriculum of our young people, by the time they get to my age, they will look at life so much differently, you understand?”

“Maybe if they could meet more than just one day a week or twice a week.”

“I wish it was a little longer, ... more months.”

“I just wish that it could be more, more time in the classroom, more time to visit, more time, you know, we had, I think we went twice a week. ... I wish it could be maybe five days or four, three days, or every day.”

“I think there should be a second part to that [Clemente].”

“I tried really hard to think of some [suggestions] because I had a feeling like OK, somebody’s going to ask, ‘Well, what about weak areas of the course? You have so many good things to say, there’s got to be some negatives.’ But I honestly can’t think of any downside. I mean, like, the only thing I guess I could say that I ever felt was a little frustrated that there wasn’t enough time to always go over everything that we wanted to talk about, but that’s, like, just a reflection of how excited we were to keep talking about what we were learning.”

“I wish it was offered to a 100 people instead of 50. I know that comes down to your budget, resources, and hours but, I mean, everything about it was a pro all the way through, yeah.”

Students’ suggestions obviously take significant resources – resources they acknowledged Clemente did not have. In fact, one student said, “I wish they had more money” when I asked her for suggestions or criticisms. Although it’s unlikely that Clemente can expand to the degree students wish, the underlying themes of their suggestions are instructive. By suggesting more and longer classes, students indicate a desire for social and intellectual connection with others. By suggesting that the Clemente model be replicated in schools or that Clemente become a stand-alone institution, students argue for the value of humanities education.

### **Implications for Education and Social Work**

Students and graduates uniformly recommend the course and most see a clear place for humanities education in low-income communities. Yet the education that is most readily available to disenfranchised adults takes the form of basic education, GED preparation, and vocational courses, which students must typically pay for out-of-pocket. There are limited opportunities for low-income adults to access high quality education for free, and even fewer opportunities for humanities education. This is due in part to our society’s focus on education-for-economic gain and the widespread assumption that an education in the humanities lacks earning potential.

A former long-time course director bemoaned raising money for the course and attributed the difficulty to funders’ focus on children, rather than adults: “The real difficulties in Clemente are practical difficulties, that nobody wants to fund it because people think that the children are the future. They don’t see the need to spend this money on these adults who already had their chance.” Indeed, there are more arts and humanities programs for low-income youth than for

low-income adults, though there is certainly no surplus for either. The Bard High School Early College program, for example, gives students a liberal arts college education as part of their four-year public high school program. Students at schools in New York City, Newark, Baltimore, New Orleans, and Cleveland are taught by college faculty in undergraduate seminars and receive college credits up to an associate in arts degree from Bard College, tuition-free, concurrently with a high school diploma. When respondents suggested expanding Clemente into schools, this is likely what they had in mind, but the program is only available in select cities, and the burden of bringing the humanities to the public should not fall on Bard College alone.

Parental engagement is important to educators and social workers alike. How do we get parents more involved in their children's schooling? How do we get parents to talk more to their children? How do we get parents to encourage their children to go to college? There are countless programs run by schools and social service agencies aimed at increasing parental involvement in myriad forms. Clemente does not directly address parenting skills, but parents nevertheless leave the course feeling more efficacious and more engaged; they perceive themselves as role models for their children. Perhaps it's worth conceiving of a parental engagement strategy outside the norm, something different than the standard, formal program explicitly aimed at, say, fostering parental leadership in school or increasing the number of words a parent says to their child. Clemente is aimed at providing a liberal education to participants, but parental engagement seems to be a by-product. It is easy to imagine a Clemente course for parents held at a community school. Community schools, after all, aim to build partnerships with the community and cultivate parent leaders, and yet there isn't a single Clemente-community school partnership anywhere in the US.

It is also easy to imagine Clemente being used by social workers as an intervention for

clients coping with depression, anxiety, or managed mental illness; for parents; for ex-offenders and veterans reintegrating into society; and for anyone seeking to bolster their confidence or jumpstart their education. Like the Changing Lives Through Literature program, Clemente could be used as an alternative form of sentencing. The course might also be beneficial for those in substance abuse treatment, as the free humanities course run through Stanford University at Hope House, a residential drug and alcohol treatment program for women, demonstrates.

Social workers' clients are often vulnerable and oppressed, just as Clemente students often are. It seems that every social service agency has potential Clemente students in its roster of clients, and social workers can – and do – play a key role in referrals to Clemente. Social workers are instrumental not only in directing students to Clemente, but are also integral to the success of some course sites. Due to financial constraints, not all sites have dedicated social workers but sites that *do* have social workers are able to provide students with counseling, referrals, and assistance with employment, housing, and health care, for example. Social workers help to link students to whatever services they might need, services that once in place may help them persist in the course. Considering the vulnerable populations Clemente serves, all course sites would benefit from the provision of a social worker.

Clemente parents routinely praise the humanities-focused child care. At sites with humanities-focused child care, Clemente seems to function as a two-generation approach – an antipoverty strategy to support both parents and children (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014). Exclusively child-focused programs and policies often focus on improving children's outcomes, such as health or school readiness, without supporting parents' educational and/or economic success. Likewise, adult-focused programs and policies, such as workforce development and postsecondary education, typically aim to increase economic and/or

educational success but may not take into account adults' role as parents and their children's needs. Two-generation programs provide opportunities for and meet the needs of parents and their children *together*. There is a growing consensus that children can't thrive in homes where their parents struggle to make ends meet, and low-income parents can't succeed without meaningful support for their children (Gruendel, 2014). In response, many practitioners are exploring two-generation models that target both low-income children and parents by combining interventions to interrupt the cycle of poverty (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 2014; Haskins, Garfinkel, & McLanahan, 2014). Clemente's child care represents an important opportunity to make the program a truly two-generation effort. When families have access to high-quality early education and supports for children, assistance to strengthen parents' caregiving skills, and tools to improve their economic standing (such as postsecondary education), the outcomes for parents and children are likely to improve. When Clemente course sites elect to provide high-quality, educational child care in addition to high-quality postsecondary education for adults, the potential to positively impact both generations is maximized.

It costs about \$50,000 to run a Clemente course, and many directors candidly spoke of how "expensive" it is to run a course well over the long term. Federal funding for the arts and humanities has always been meager, and is more uncertain now than ever. The National Science Foundation's federal appropriation in FY15 was \$7.2 billion. Combined, the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the National Endowment Humanities (NEH) had an appropriation of a little over \$290 million; both contribute funding to public humanities programs like Clemente. Such disparate funding runs contrary to the fundamental purposes for which Congress created the NEH and NEA in 1965. The founding legislation for these agencies notes that

an advanced civilization must not limit its efforts to science and technology alone, but must give full value and support to the other great branches of scholarly and cultural activity in order to achieve a better understanding of the past, a better analysis of the present, and a better view of the future. (NEH, 2016)

The Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, argues for the complete elimination of both the NEH and NEA, however. Their *Blueprint for Balance* (2017) argues that “government should not use its coercive power of taxation to compel taxpayers to support cultural organizations and activities” (p. 79) and that “taxpayers should not be forced to pay for plays, paintings, pageants, and scholarly journals” (p. 80). Funding for state humanities councils comes through the NEH, and humanities councils fund Clemente courses in several states. The potential elimination of that funding is a matter of concern not only for humanists, but for educators and social workers as well.

## **Conclusion**

Clemente and Clemente-inspired courses are imperfect. They operate independently, and the quality of teaching, as well as the curriculum, varies by course site. Attrition is often high and for most sites, money is tight. Almost all faculty and staff have “day jobs,” so course administration is an add-on. There typically isn’t personnel dedicated to student retention or alumni relations; that’s a task often shouldered by course directors. Different directors conceive of different ends for the course. Alone, the course is certainly not an antidote to poverty. Used in concert with other more structural programs, perhaps it could help. Similarly, it isn’t a pipeline to college. Though some students do go on, most do not earn college degrees. As Jason, an art history instructor, concluded, the end goal of the program isn’t entirely clear, but perhaps that’s OK:

Sometimes it seems as though it's [Clemente] not totally sure what it's doing. Like it's a big program, like as a national program. I think that with Earl Shorris, it was a little, tiny thing, right? Just sort of a little experiment. But as it grows into more of a kind of a national movement, there's the question of what really are we doing? Are we trying to make college possible and accessible? Are we really trying to get people started on the way to college? Or is this enrichment? Or is this social justice?... I don't know that that could be changed, but I think it might just be part of what it is to do it and there's sort of a mystery, and I think in some ways the mystery has to be preserved. But are we doing well? ... I think that sometimes there's the question about what are we doing and why?

It may be easy for some to dismiss Clemente students as self-selected, ambitious people who already value education – of course they'd have positive things to say about the program. Many of them are, but many are also fearful and directionless with dubious thoughts about education. Students' responses and Clemente's many course sites point to an unmet need for high quality humanities education in underserved communities. They confirm Shorris' insight that the absence of humanities in disadvantaged communities isn't for lack of interest, but for lack of access.

It's clear that many students leave the experience feeling changed in positive ways. Interviews and observations reveal students' recasting their beliefs about themselves, the world, and where they belong in it. Such a profound "paradigmatic shift" characterizes transformative learning and represents "the revision of a frame of reference in concert with reflection on experience" (Taylor, 2008, p. 5). Many students experienced significant shifts in their thinking and frames of reference as they moved from feelings of exclusion and marginalization to inclusion and community. Clemente isn't "transformative" for everyone, however. Each student's experience is unique and what they get out of the course is a function of multiple variables, including course content and pedagogy, as well as the student's life experiences, assets, and challenges.

At a minimum, Clemente provides a "protected intellectual space" where students engage

in critical thought and dialogue (Hyland-Russell & Groen, 2011, p. 76). Those skills are necessary for participation in a democracy, and education in the humanities provides development in those skills. Dialogue, whether focused on philosophy, art, literature, or history, provides multiple perspectives on the human experience and offers students ways to connect their lives with structural contexts and discourses.

I'd like to end with an excerpt from an interview with Khadijah, a 2015 graduate in her forties. She relayed an educational history not unlike many other Clemente students. Hers was a history marked by a lack of academic support and individual encouragement. What she found in Clemente was something "magical," and while she couldn't put her finger on exactly what it was, she left feeling smarter, more confident, and a "better" person. Clemente's strengths, what it brings to students and how it makes them feel, far outweigh its weaknesses.

There's something magical in there. ... There's something that happens ... where the person has made the choice for self-development through education that does not take place in a lot of schools. I'm not sure what that is, and I can't believe that it's all of a sudden we as individuals want to become these learners and we're more amenable now to learning. I don't think that's it because I've always loved to learn. But Clemente has figured out something magical and I don't know if it's, you know, "we meet you where you are," I don't know if it's that. It's not too much and not too little. I don't know if it's because the curriculum is set up in a way that it gives the right perspective into your life as an individual regardless of where you come from. Magic goes on, and I don't know if it's the professors, but everybody comes in there and will just walk out of there feeling smarter – that confidence thing.

Even if we might never go back to a museum or might never read poetry again or might never pick up another philosophy book, something happens in the Clemente program ... that allows us to be better people. I guess in support of Clemente I wish I could see that happening more often, and I wish I could've had that same support in that class of 36 children ... [in] my middle school where I got straight F's.

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APPENDIX A:  
Clemente Course Sample Budgets

| <b>SAMPLE BUDGET PROVIDED BY BARD COLLEGE<sup>2</sup></b>   |                 |
|---|-----------------|
| <b>Description</b>  | <b>Expense</b>  |
| Course Director   | \$15,000        |
| Faculty (five faculty at \$3,000 each)  | \$15,000        |
| Classroom Rental  | \$1,500         |
| Materials/Supplies – Administrative (student recruitment, flyers, application materials, publicity, copies)               | \$1,000         |
| Honoraria for Guest Lecturers (\$200 x 5)   | \$1,200         |
| Materials/Supplies – Classes (books, photocopied readers, notebooks, copies of student papers for evaluation and syllabi) | \$7,300         |
| Refreshments  | \$1,300         |
| Postage, Phone, Fax   | \$200           |
| Child care  | \$4,000         |
| Student Transportation  | \$1,500         |
| <b>Total Program Costs</b>  | <b>\$48,000</b> |

| <b>SAMPLE BUDGET PROVIDED BY MASS HUMANITIES<sup>3</sup></b>  |                 |
|---|-----------------|
| <b>Description</b>  | <b>Expense</b>  |
| Course Director   | \$13,000        |
| Faculty (five faculty at \$4,500 each)  | \$22,500        |
| Fieldtrips  | \$1,000         |
| Materials/Supplies – Administrative (student recruitment, flyers, application materials, publicity, copies)               | \$1,000         |
| Materials/Supplies – Classes (books, photocopied readers, notebooks, copies of student papers for evaluation and syllabi) | \$6,300         |
| Postage, Phone, Fax   | \$200           |
| Child care  | \$4,000         |
| Student Transportation  | \$1,500         |
| <b>Total Program Costs</b>  | <b>\$49,500</b> |

<sup>2</sup> Bard College. (2016). Clemente Course in the Humanities Frequently Asked Questions. Retrieved from <http://clemente.bard.edu/faqs/>

<sup>3</sup> Mass Humanities. (2016). The Clemente Course in the Humanities: Establishing a new site. Retrieved from [http://masshumanities.org/files/programs/Clemente/clemente\\_startup.pdf](http://masshumanities.org/files/programs/Clemente/clemente_startup.pdf)

APPENDIX B:  
Consent Form for Staff Interviews at Midwest and Northeast Sites

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

**Project:** An Examination of Adult Students' Experiences in Clemente Courses in the Humanities

**Researcher:** Charity Anderson, PhD candidate, University of Chicago

**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Charles Payne, University of Chicago

**Introduction:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study of adult students' experiences in Clemente courses. This study is being conducted by Charity Anderson at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration (SSA) under the supervision of Dr. Charles Payne, also of SSA.

You have been approached to participate in this study because I wish to better understand the experiences of students in free humanities courses.

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this research project is to examine (1) the experiences of Clemente students and the ways in which they may, or may not, change or develop throughout the year, and (2) the programmatic principles, practices, or features that are the most meaningful to participants and/or impact them the most deeply.

**Procedures:**

You will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview. The interview will take approximately one hour to an hour and a half, depending on the depth of conversation between us. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your experiences as an instructor or related staff member and your thoughts about humanities education for historically marginalized populations.

The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. The results of the interviews will be used to write a dissertation, which may be published in an academic journal, as a book, or elsewhere.

**Risks/Benefits:**

The risks associated with participation in the interviews are minimal. No identifying information will be recorded. If you experience discomfort (such as stress or anxiety) as a result of your participation, you will be directed to appropriate resources.

There are no direct benefits to you from participation. Indirectly, you will contribute to scholars' understanding of the impact(s) of humanities education in historically marginalized communities.

**Confidentiality:**

The audiotape of your interview will be immediately transferred to a secure server and deleted from the recorder. Only the researcher, Charity Anderson, will have access to the recordings and transcripts. Your name will not appear in any interview transcripts or referenced in any material obtained from the interviews.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even if you decide to consent today, you may withdraw from the interview without penalty at any time.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about this research project or observations, please contact Charity Anderson at 347-578-0610 or [charityanderson@uchicago.edu](mailto:charityanderson@uchicago.edu) or Dr. Charles Payne at [cmpayne@uchicago.edu](mailto:cmpayne@uchicago.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Kari E. Walsh, Director of the SSA Institutional Review Board, at 773-834-0402 or [kewalsh@uchicago.edu](mailto:kewalsh@uchicago.edu).

**Statement of Consent:**

- I agree to the use of the interviews as described above. I understand that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.
  
- I agree to be audiotaped during my interviews as described above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX C:  
Consent Form for Student Interviews at Northeast Site

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

**Project:** An Examination of Adult Students' Experiences in Clemente Courses in the Humanities

**Researcher:** Charity Anderson, PhD candidate, University of Chicago

**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Charles Payne, University of Chicago

**Introduction:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study of adult students' experiences in Clemente courses. This study is being conducted by Charity Anderson at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration (SSA) under the supervision of Dr. Charles Payne, also of SSA.

You have been approached to participate in this study because I wish to better understand the experiences of students in free humanities courses.

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this research project is to examine (1) the experiences of Clemente students and the ways in which they may, or may not, change or develop throughout the year, and (2) the programmatic principles, practices, or features that are the most meaningful to participants and/or impact them the most deeply.

**Procedures:**

You will be asked to participate in:

- One in-person, semi-structured interview at the beginning of the course (around October-November 2015).
  - This will take approximately 30 minutes, and you will be asked about your educational background, interest in the course, and expectations.
- One in-person, semi-structured interview following graduation (around May-July 2016).
  - This will take approximately 1-1.5 hours, depending on the depth of conversation between us. You will be asked questions about your experiences in each of the classes and plans for the future.
- One follow-up interview about 3 months after you've completed the course (around September-October 2016).
  - This interview will take no longer than 20-30 minutes and you will be asked to describe your activities since completing the course. Follow-up interviews may be completed by phone, email, or in person. During our second interview, you will be asked to provide your preferred method of contact for follow-up interviews.

The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. The results of the interviews will be used to write a dissertation, which may be published in an academic journal, as a book, or elsewhere.

**Risks/Benefits:**

The risks associated with participation in the interviews are minimal. No identifying information will be recorded. If you experience discomfort (such as stress or anxiety) as a result of your participation, you will be directed to appropriate resources.

There are no direct benefits to you from participation. Indirectly, you will contribute to scholars' understanding of the impact(s) of humanities education in historically marginalized communities.

**Confidentiality:**

The audiotape of your interview will be immediately transferred to a secure server and deleted from the recorder. Only the researcher, Charity Anderson, will have access to the recordings and transcripts. In the event that a follow-up interview is conducted over email, the content will be transferred to a secure server, and the email will be deleted. Your name will not appear in any interview transcripts or referenced in any material obtained from the interviews.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even if you decide to consent today, you may withdraw from the interviews without penalty at any time.

**Incentives for Participation:**

Upon completion of the first interview, you will receive a \$10.00 gift card from a local or online retailer.

Upon completion of the second interview, you will receive a \$20.00 gift card from a local or online retailer.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about this research project or observations, please contact Charity Anderson at 347-578-0610 or [charityanderson@uchicago.edu](mailto:charityanderson@uchicago.edu) or Dr. Charles Payne at [cmpayne@uchicago.edu](mailto:cmpayne@uchicago.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Kari E. Walsh, Director of the SSA Institutional Review Board, at 773-834-0402 or [kewalsh@uchicago.edu](mailto:kewalsh@uchicago.edu).

**Statement of Consent:**

- I agree to the use of the interviews as described above. I understand that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.
- I agree to be audiotaped during my interviews as described above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX D:  
Consent Form for Student Interviews at Midwest Site

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS**

**Project:** An Examination of Adult Students' Experiences in Clemente Courses in the Humanities

**Researcher:** Charity Anderson, PhD student, University of Chicago

**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Charles Payne, University of Chicago

**Introduction:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study of adult students' experiences in Clemente courses. This study is being conducted by Charity Anderson at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration (SSA) under the supervision of Dr. Charles Payne, also of SSA.

You have been approached to participate in this study because I wish to better understand the experiences of students in free humanities courses.

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this research project is to examine (1) the experiences of Clemente students and the ways in which they may, or may not, change or develop throughout the year, and (2) the programmatic principles, practices, or features that are the most meaningful to participants and/or impact them the most deeply.

**Procedures:**

You will be asked to participate in one formal, in-person, semi-structured interview over the course of the program, as well as three shorter follow-up interviews 3, 6, and 12 months after you've completed the course (roughly, late August-September 2015, December 2015-January 2016, and May-June 2016). Follow-up interviews may be completed by phone, email, or in person. During our first interview, you will be asked to provide your preferred method of contact for follow-up interviews.

The formal, in-person, semi-structured interview will take approximately an hour and a half, depending on the depth of conversation between us. During the interview, you will be asked questions about your educational and personal background and experiences in each of the classes.

The three follow-up interviews will likely take no longer than 20-30 minutes each, and you will be asked to describe your activities since completing the course.

The interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed. The results of the interviews will be used to write a dissertation, which may be published in an academic journal, as a book, or elsewhere.

**Risks/Benefits:**

The risks associated with participation in the interviews are minimal. No identifying information will be recorded. If you experience discomfort (such as stress or anxiety) as a result of your participation, you will be directed to appropriate resources.

There are no direct benefits to you from participation. Indirectly, you will contribute to scholars' understanding of the impact(s) of humanities education in historically marginalized communities.

**Confidentiality:**

The audiotape of your interview will be immediately transferred to a secure server and deleted from the recorder. Only the researcher, Charity Anderson, will have access to the recordings and transcripts. In the

event that a follow-up interview is conducted over email, the content will be transferred to a secure server, and the email will be deleted. Your name will not appear in any interview transcripts or referenced in any material obtained from the interviews.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even if you decide to consent today, you may withdraw from the interviews without penalty at any time.

**Incentives for Participation:**

Upon completion of the first interview, you will receive a \$20.00 gift card from a local or online retailer.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about this research project or observations, please contact Charity Anderson at 347-578-0610 or [charityanderson@uchicago.edu](mailto:charityanderson@uchicago.edu) or Dr. Charles Payne at [cmpayne@uchicago.edu](mailto:cmpayne@uchicago.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Kari E. Walsh, Director of the SSA Institutional Review Board, at 773-834-0402 or [kewalsh@uchicago.edu](mailto:kewalsh@uchicago.edu).

**Statement of Consent:**

- I agree to the use of the interviews as described above. I understand that I may withdraw at any time without penalty.
  
- I agree to be audiotaped during my interviews as described above.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX E:  
Oral Consent Script for Phone Interviews

Hi [name].

This is Charity Anderson. Thank you for responding to my request to talk to you. How are you? Before we start, I'd like to go over some details and get your permission to continue. Does that sound OK?

First off, I'm a PhD candidate at The University of Chicago conducting research about students' experiences in the Clemente course. I spent last year with the Chicago course and I'm currently participant observing a course in the northeast, but I also wanted to hear from participants at other sites and from those who may have stopped taking the course or already have graduated. [For directors]: I'm also interested in hearing from course directors.

I'd like to talk to you about your experience as a [student, director] at [site name]. Our conversation should take about 30 minutes. There are minimal risks to participating. I'm committed to protecting your privacy and maintaining confidentiality. I will never identify you by name or any other information that would make it possible for anyone to identify you in any presentation or written reports about this study. Only I and a transcriptionist will have access to data from our interview. The transcriptionist has signed a confidentiality agreement and is legally bound to keep your information confidential; they will not know your name or have access to any identifying information about you and will delete the audio files once the transcript is complete.

Although this study may not benefit you personally, I hope that the results will add to our knowledge about adult students' experiences in free humanities courses. [For students only]: I'll get your address at the end of our call and send you a \$10 gift card as compensation for your time. Any questions so far?

Please understand that your participation is voluntary and you have the right to withdraw your consent or stop the interview at any time without penalty. You have the right to refuse to answer particular questions. With your permission, I will record our call so that I can transcribe it later.

If you have any questions about this study, or about anything else, you can call or text me at 347-578-0610 or email me at [charityanderson@uchicago.edu](mailto:charityanderson@uchicago.edu). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 773-834-0402.

Do you have any questions at this time?

Would you like to be interviewed about your experience in Clemente? [If 'no', thank them for their time and end the call. If 'yes', ask]: Do I have your permission to record this call? [If yes, begin interview. If no, ask]: Do I have your permission to conduct the interview and take notes? [If yes, begin interview. If 'no', thank them for their time and end the call.]

APPENDIX F:  
Consent for Observations at Midwest Site

**CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH OBSERVATIONS**

**Project:** An Examination of Adult Students' Experiences in Clemente Courses in the Humanities

**Researcher:** Charity Anderson, PhD student, University of Chicago

**Faculty Sponsor:** Dr. Charles Payne, University of Chicago

**Introduction:**

You are being asked to participate in a research study of adult students' experiences in Clemente courses. This study is being conducted by Charity Anderson at the University of Chicago School of Social Service Administration (SSA) under the supervision of Dr. Charles Payne, also of SSA.

You have been approached to participate in this study because I wish to better understand the experiences of students in free humanities courses.

**Purpose:**

The purpose of this research project is to examine (1) the experiences of Clemente students and the ways in which they may, or may not, change or develop throughout the year, and (2) the programmatic principles, practices, or features that are the most meaningful to participants and/or impact them the most deeply.

**Procedures:**

You will be observed during classes and related events, which generally occur twice weekly. The researcher will take notes (handwritten or typed) about the content of the classes and events; comments, conversations, discussions, and questions that may arise during the course of the classes and events; and students' interactions with one another as well as with instructors and other non-students. No information will be audio- or videotaped.

The results of the observations will be used to write a dissertation, which may be published in an academic journal, as a book, or elsewhere.

**Risks/Benefits:**

The risks associated with participation in the observations are minimal. No identifying information will be recorded. If you experience discomfort (such as stress or anxiety) as a result of your participation, you will be directed to appropriate resources.

There are no direct benefits to you from participation. Indirectly, you will contribute to scholars' understanding of the impact(s) of humanities education in historically marginalized communities.

**Confidentiality:**

Field notes will not include names or other identifying information. Only the researcher, Charity Anderson, will have access to the field notes. Your name will not appear in any material obtained from the observations.

**Voluntary Participation:**

Your participation in this project is voluntary. Even if you decide to consent today, you may withdraw from the observations without penalty at any time.

**Contacts and Questions:**

If you have any questions about this research project or observations, please contact Charity Anderson at 347-578-0610 or [charityanderson@uchicago.edu](mailto:charityanderson@uchicago.edu) or Dr. Charles Payne at [cmpayne@uchicago.edu](mailto:cmpayne@uchicago.edu). If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Kari E. Walsh, Director of the SSA Institutional Review Board, at 773-834-0402 or [kewalsh@uchicago.edu](mailto:kewalsh@uchicago.edu).

**Statement of Consent:**

I agree to the use of the observations as described above. I understand that I may withdraw at any time without penalty, at which point the researcher will not include me, my actions, or my comments in any notes.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

APPENDIX G:  
Recruitment Email to Clemente Directors

Dear [Name]:

[If applicable: I had the good fortune of meeting you at the annual meeting at Bard back in May.] My name is Charity Anderson, and I'm a PhD candidate at The University of Chicago. I'm studying the Clemente Course for my dissertation and would like to hear from as many voices as possible about their experiences in and with the course.

I'm writing with two requests:

- 1) I'd like to interview *you* about your experience as a course director. Our interview would be conducted over the phone at a time convenient to you and would take about 30 minutes.
- 2) I'd also like to talk to your students – past, present, and *especially those who did not complete the course*. Interviews with students would also be conducted over the phone at a time of their choosing and would take about 30 minutes. After the interview, I will mail students a \$10 gift card as compensation for their time.

If you would like to set up a time to be interviewed, or have questions, you can contact me via email at [charityanderson@uchicago.edu](mailto:charityanderson@uchicago.edu) or call/text at 347-578-0610.

If you're willing to pass my request onto your past and/or present students (including those who did not persist in the course), I've included a message to them below, which you could paste into an email (if you have an email list of former students) and/or print out for current students.

Sincerest thanks for your time, and all the best,  
Charity

---

Greetings Clemente students,

My name is Charity Anderson and I'm a PhD candidate at the University of Chicago. I'm studying students' experiences in the Clemente course for my dissertation. I spent last year with a course in the midwest and I'm currently with a course in the northeast, but I also wanted to hear from participants at other sites. I'd like to talk to you about your experience, *even if you did not finish the course*.

The interview would take place over the phone whenever is convenient for you and would take about 30 minutes. I'll mail you a \$10 gift card for your time after the interview.

If you're interested in talking about your experience in Clemente or have questions, you can email me at [charityanderson@uchicago.edu](mailto:charityanderson@uchicago.edu) or call/text at 347-578-0610. If I'm not available to take your call, please leave a message and I'll call you back.

Thank you, and I hope to hear from you soon,  
Charity Anderson

APPENDIX H:  
Recruitment Message for Clemente Alumni Facebook Page

Greetings Clemente Alumni:

My name is Charity Anderson and I'm a PhD candidate at The University of Chicago. I'm studying students' experiences in the Clemente course for my dissertation, and I'd like to talk to you about your experience, even if you did not finish the course.

The interview would take place over the phone whenever is convenient for you and would take about 30 minutes. I'll mail you a \$10 gift card for your time after the interview.

If you're interested or have questions, you can contact me here or email me at [charityanderson@uchicago.edu](mailto:charityanderson@uchicago.edu)

I look forward to hearing from you!

Charity Anderson

APPENDIX I:  
Interview Guide for Staff at Sites Other Than Midwest and Northeast Sites

Describe your affiliation (role) with the Clemente program.

How did you become involved? How long have you been involved? At what site(s)?

Describe your professional background (i.e., did you have a background or experience in the humanities before this position?).

Are you affiliated with any particular institution(s)? If so, which one(s) and in what capacity (e.g., professor, lecturer, etc.)?

Characterize your experiences working with Clemente. What is it like? How would you describe the students? What are your relationships/interactions like with the students?

[For directors who have taught or are teaching elsewhere]: How do your other teaching experiences (e.g., in academia) compare to teaching in Clemente?

What do you see as the “goal” of the course? Do you think it achieves that goal? If so, how?

Do you perceive the course to be impactful? If so, in what ways and on whom? (e.g., impact on students, students who are parents, students’ families, community, instructors/staff, etc.).

Have you witnessed any kind of change or development – positive or negative – among students as the course progresses? If so, describe.

What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the program? What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the students?

Do you anticipate making any changes or enhancements to the program in the future? If so, what?

APPENDIX J:  
Interview Guide for Staff at Midwest and Northeast Sites

[All]: Describe your affiliation (role) with the Clemente program.

[All]: How did you become involved? How long have you been involved? At what site(s)?

[For instructors]: Describe your professional background (i.e., is the subject you teach at Clemente one you also teach or have taught elsewhere, have been trained in, etc.?).

[For directors/coordinators/social workers]: Describe your professional background (i.e., did you have a background or experience in the humanities before this position?).

[For instructors]: Are you affiliated with any particular institution(s)? If so, which one(s) and in what capacity (e.g., professor, lecturer, etc.)?

[For instructors]: Characterize your experiences teaching in Clemente. What class do you teach? What is it like? What material do you cover and why? How would you describe the students? What are your relationships/interactions like with the students?

[For instructors]: Are there particular aspects of your course (e.g., readings, material/concepts, discussions) that seem to affect students? How so and whom does it appear to impact most (e.g., women, men, old, young, parents, etc.)? [For those who have taught in Clemente before]: Is this consistent from year to year? If so, why do you think that is?

[For directors/coordinators/social workers]: Characterize your experiences working with Clemente. What is it like? How would you describe the students? What are your relationships/interactions like with the students?

[For instructors who have taught or are teaching elsewhere]: How do your other teaching experiences (e.g., in academia) compare to teaching at Clemente (e.g., do you cover the same material?, in a different way?, are the discussions different in some way?, level of student commitment?, etc.)?

[All]: What do you see as the “goal” of the course? Do you think it achieves that goal? If so, how?

[All]: Do you perceive the course to be impactful? If so, in what ways and on whom? (e.g., impact on students, students who are parents, students’ families, community, instructors/staff, etc.). What are the underlying programmatic principles, practices, or features that you see as the most meaningful to students?

[All]: Have you witnessed any kind of change or development – positive or negative – among students as the course progresses? If so, describe.

[All]: What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the program? What do you see as the

strengths and weaknesses of the students?

[For directors/coordinators/social workers]: What are some of the challenges students encounter with persisting in the course? What supports are available to students?

[For social workers]: What is the role of social work in the course? What do you see as the relationship between social work and humanities education?

[For directors/coordinators]: How does a Clemente Course come into being at a given location? What are some of the challenges of keeping a course afloat? Is there a larger agenda for classes to proliferate in low-income communities across the US?

[For directors/coordinators]: Do you anticipate making any changes or enhancements to the program in the future? If so, what?

[For instructors]: Do you anticipate making any changes or enhancements to your class in the future? If so, what?

[For social workers]: Do you anticipate making any changes or enhancements to your role with Clemente and the students in the future? If so, what?

APPENDIX K:  
Interview #1 Guide for Students at Northeast Site

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I just want to get a general sense of what brought you to the course and what your expectations and goals for the year are. Our conversation should take about half an hour, but we can talk more or less if you'd like; does that sound OK?

How did you hear about the course?

Why did you decide to apply?

What did you think when you saw that it was a "humanities" course? What did that word mean to you? Have you taken humanities courses before?

What's your educational background?

Do you have children? [If so]: Do they know that you're taking the course? What have you told them about it, or about what you're doing? Will you be bringing your child/children to child care at Clemente?

This course has just started, but what do you expect (e.g., reading, writing, assignments, discussions, classmates)?

What are your goals for the year (personal, academic, professional)? What do you hope to get out of the course?

What do you think you'll need in order to succeed this year? What do you think could get in the way of your success?

How would you describe yourself right now?

And one last question: Do you feel like you have control over your life? Why or why not?

Thanks again for talking with me. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

APPENDIX L:  
Interview #2 Guide for Students at Northeast Site

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about Clemente.

I'd like to talk about your experiences in the course. So, let's go through the classes and their readings and instructors and talk about them. I'm interested in what you liked and didn't like and why, and what kind of impact they had on you.

[For each class – Philosophy, Literature, Art History, History, Critical Thinking and Writing, Political Science, Immigration/Miscellaneous class]:

- How do you feel about this class? What are your thoughts about the instructor?
- What spoke to you or had the biggest impact? Why/how?
- What was your least favorite or what did you struggle with most? Why?
- Did this class relate to your life or thinking in any way? [If so, how? If not, why do you think that is?]
- Did this class alter your thinking in any way? [If so, how? If not, why do you think that is?]
- Did you talk to anyone outside Clemente about this class or the readings? [If so, who and what did you talk about? If not, why not?]
- If you didn't understand something or were struggling, were you comfortable asking for help?
- Had you read things like this before? Do you feel comfortable reading and writing about these topics now? Why?
- Critical Thinking and Writing: How would you describe your critical thinking and writing skills? How has being in Clemente affected them?

Do you think we covered a diverse range of authors/readings this year? [If yes, why? If not, why not?]. A criticism of Clemente courses is that they cover the work of dead white men; what are your feelings about that?

Have you attended any of the events outside of class like the plays, symphony, etc. or taken advantage of the services offered? What did you think about those? Had you ever attended an event like that before? Would you again?

I also want to talk about the group as a whole for a moment. Describe your relationship with others in the class – is there anyone you've gotten close to? How important are your classmates to your experience in Clemente?

What are the best and worst aspects of this program? Is this a program you would recommend? [If so, why? If not, why not?]. What kind of person would you recommend it to – what kind of traits would that person have?

- [For me to think about]: What drives attrition; why do women enroll and graduate at higher rates than men?

When you think about your life overall and your experience so far, how has being in Clemente

impacted you? What has been most meaningful? In what ways are you different than when you started the course? How do you think you might change as a result? Has it impacted your education and/or career goals? [Are you planning to continue in the Bridge Course next year?] Other areas?

- [For me to think about]: Nussbaum's (2010) notion of an engaged democratic citizen as one who thinks and acts critically, imaginatively, and independently; controls the direction of their own life; and engages in action to improve their life and community.

Do you have children or grandchildren, or children who live with you or that you interact with regularly?

[For parents]: Do those children know you're in Clemente? What do they think you do there? Do you talk to them about it? [If so, what do you talk about? If not, why not?]

[For parents]: What are your educational goals for your children? What kind of goals did your parents have for you? Has being in Clemente impacted the goals you have for your children in any way?

[For parents]: How has being in Clemente affected the way you parent and/or interact with children? How do you think it might impact your parenting?

- [For me to think about]: Asking questions, encouraging imagination, reading with kids, race/racial socialization.

How has being in Clemente affected the way you think about education and schooling in general?

Clemente is designed to target low-income communities and people with any level of education as long as they can read a newspaper. In our class, the students are largely racial minorities. What impact do you think a humanities course like this can have for low-income adult students? Do you think humanities courses might have any particular impact on racial minorities in particular? Would a more integrated class be different?

Are you active in the community/neighborhood/groups or associations of some kind? [If so, what do you do?]

How do you think others perceive you? Last fall, you described yourself as [...]. Does that still hold or would you describe yourself differently now? [If not, what's changed?] You also stated that you [did, didn't] feel like you have control over your life. Is that still the case? [If not, what's changed?]

What kind of employment experiences have you had? What do you do now? How would your co-workers describe you? What are your post-Clemente plans/goals – education, career, and/or otherwise?

APPENDIX M:  
Interview Guide for Students at Midwest Site

Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me about your experience in the Clemente Course.

I want to start with the course before we get to questions about your background. How did you hear about the Clemente Course? What did you think about it initially? What did you think it would be like? What led you to enroll? What did “humanities” mean to you then?

---

I'd like to talk about your experiences in the program so far. So, let's go through the classes and their readings and instructors and talk about them. I'm interested in what you liked and didn't like and why, and what kind of impact they had on you.

For each class: How do you feel about this class? What are your thoughts about the instructor? What spoke to you or had the biggest impact? Why/how? What was your least favorite or what did you struggle with most? Why? Did this class relate to your life or thinking in any way? [If so, how? If not, why do you think that is?] Did this class alter your thinking in any way? [If so, how? If not, why do you think that is?] Did you talk to anyone outside the Clemente Course about this class or the readings? [If so, who and what did you talk about? If not, why not?] When you don't understand something, do you feel comfortable asking for help?

#### Philosophy

- Plato, *Republic*, *Allegory of the Cave*, *Five Dialogues* (e.g., *Apology*)
- Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*
- de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*
- Berger & Luckmann, *Social Construction of Reality*
- Had you read things like this before? What were your first thoughts when you saw the syllabus? Do you feel comfortable reading and writing about these topics?

#### Art history

##### Critical thinking and writing

- Idea of a thesis – formulating one and framing a problem
- How would you describe your critical thinking and writing skills? How has being in the Clemente Course affected them?

##### Literature

- [For me to think about]: These works focus on family; has reading them made you think differently about the idea of family and/or parenting?
- Sophocles, *Antigone*
- Shakespeare, *King Lear*
- Walker, *Everyday Use*
- Deavere Smith, *Twilight, Los Angeles 1992*
- Lyric poetry

- Baldwin, *Notes of a Native Son*
- Had you read things like this before? What were your first thoughts when you saw the syllabus? Do you feel more comfortable reading and writing about these topics? Why?

## History

- [For me to think about]: This class focuses heavily on race; have the readings or discussions made you think differently about the idea of race and/or your own race? Or the way you talk about race with your kids or and/other people?
- Race: The Power of an Illusion (DVD)
- *The Declaration of Independence and Preamble to the Constitution*
- Zinn, *A People's History of the United States*
- Jefferson, *Notes on the Slave State of Virginia*
- Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom*
- Jackson, *Second Inaugural Address, Indian Removal Act*
- *Dred Scott v. Sanford* (1857)
- 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> amendments
- Haney, *White by Law: The Legal Construction of Race*
- *Chinese Exclusion Act*
- *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896)
- *Lum v. Rice* (1927)
- Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*
- Wells, *Southern Horrors: The Anti-lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells*
- Hughes, *The Bitter River*
- WWII and Japanese internment readings
- Had you read things like this before? What were your first thoughts when you saw the syllabus? Do you feel more comfortable reading and writing about these topics? Why?

Have you attended any of the events outside of class like Natasha Nevada Diggs' poetry reading, *Waiting for Godot*, the Bridge Course symposium, etc.? What did you think about those? Had you ever attended an event like that before? Would you again?

I also want to talk about the group as a whole for a moment. Describe your relationship with others in the class – is there anyone you've gotten close to? How important are your classmates to your experience in the Clemente Course?

What are the best and worst aspects of this program? Is this a program you would recommend? [If so, why? If not, why not?] What kind of person would you recommend it to – what kind of traits would that person have?

- [For me to think about]: What drives attrition.

When you think about your life overall and your experience so far, how has being in the Clemente Course impacted you? What has been most meaningful? In what ways are you different than when you started the course? How do you think you might change as a result? Has it impacted your education and/or career goals? [Are you planning to continue in the Bridge

Course next year?] Other areas?

- [For me to think about]: Nussbaum's (2010) notion of an engaged democratic citizen as one who thinks and acts critically, imaginatively, independently, controls the direction of their own life, and engages in action to improve their life and community.
- 

Do you have children or grandchildren, or children who live with you or that you interact with regularly?

[If have children]: Do those children know you're in the Clemente Course? What do they think you do there? Do you talk to them about it? [If so, what do you talk about? If not, why not?]

[If have children]: What are your educational goals for your children? What kind of goals did your parents have for you? Has being in the Clemente Course impacted the goals you have for your children in any way?

[If have children]: How has being in the Clemente Course affected the way you parent and/or interact with children? How do you think it might impact your parenting?

- [For me to think about]: Asking questions, encouraging imagination, reading with kids, race/racial socialization.

How has being in the Clemente Course affected the way you think about education and schooling in general?

---

The Clemente Course is designed to target low-income communities and people with any level of education as long as they can read a newspaper. What impact do you think a humanities course like this can have for low-income adult students?

In our class, the students are all racial minorities. The class is almost entirely African American; do you think humanities courses might have any particular impact on Black adult students in particular? Would an integrated class be different?

---

I want to talk a little about your background before we wrap up. Can you tell me a little about yourself? e.g., Where are you from/where grow up? Where do you live now?

Describe your educational experiences – how far have you gone in school? What did you enjoy (and not) about school? Previous experiences or perceptions of college education? [reasons for leaving?] What are your educational goals?

What kind of employment experiences have you had? What do you do now? How would your co-workers describe you? What are your career goals?

Are you active in the community/neighborhood? [If so, what do you do?]

When you think about your neighbors or community, how do you think they perceive you? How

about your family – how would they describe you? How would you describe yourself? Do feel like you have control over your life?

## APPENDIX N:

### Interview Guide for Students at Sites Other Than Midwest and Northeast Sites

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. Our conversation should take about half an hour, but we can talk more or less if you'd like; does that sound OK?

How did you hear about the course?

Why did you decide to apply?

What did you think when you saw that it was a "humanities" course? What did that word mean to you? Have/had you taken humanities courses before?

How far have you gone/did you get in the course – did you graduate? Complete the second year Bridge course?

- [For students who dropped out]: What led you to stop going to the course? Do you have plans to return? Is there anything that could have kept you in the course?
- [Depending on how far the interviewee went in the course]: When you think about the classes you took – philosophy, art history, world or American history, literature, and so on – was there anything that had an impact on you or is particularly memorable?
  - [If so]: What and why? [Probe for specifics] In what ways are you different than when you started the course? How do you think you might change/did change as a result? Has it impacted your education and/or career goals? Other areas?
  - [If not]: Why do you think that is?

Do you have children/grandchildren, or children who live with you or that you interact with regularly?

- [For parents]: Do those children know you're in/were in Clemente? Do/did you talk to them about it? [If so, what do/did you talk about? If not, why not?]
- [For parents]: What are your educational goals for your children? What kind of goals did your parents have for you? Has being in Clemente impacted the goals you have for your children in any way?
- [For parents]: How has being in the course affected the way you parent and/or interact with children? How do you think it might impact your parenting?

How has being in Clemente affected the way you think about education in general?

Can you take me through your educational background?

How would you describe yourself right now? Do you feel like you have control over your life? Why or why not?

Clemente is designed to target low-income communities and people with any level of education. What impact do you think a humanities course like this can have for low-income adults?

Thanks again for talking with me. Is there anything else that you'd like to add?

Follow-up questions for students (no longer than 20-30 minutes):

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me again. How have you been? [If student has children]: How are your children doing?

We last spoke in [month, year]. What have you been up to since then (e.g., work, school, community/neighborhood, children's lives)?

Last time we spoke, you mentioned that you felt that you [had, had not] been impacted by the course.

[If the student stated that s/he had been impacted]: You said you'd been affected by [refer to interviewee's transcript]. Do you still feel that way? Now that some time has passed since you took the course, would you change that statement in any way (i.e., add or omit anything from that statement)? Do you feel that the course has impacted you in additional or different ways since then? If so, how?

[If the student stated that s/he had not been impacted]: Do you still feel that way? [If yes]: Why do you think the course had [little, no] impact on you personally? [If no]: What changed since we last spoke? In what ways do you feel like the course has affected you?

In what ways has the course, or your experience in the course, stayed with you? Has it influenced anything you're doing now (e.g., work, school, community/neighborhood, children's lives; reading, writing, critical thinking; contact with classmates, staff)? If so, how?

When we talked last time, you mentioned some [life, education, career] goals: [refer to interviewee's transcript]. Are these still goals you're focused on or have your goals changed? What kind of progress have you made, or what prompted your change in goals? Do you have any additional, or different, goals?

One last question. I asked you in our last interview if you felt like you had control over your life. You said [refer to interviewee's transcript]. Do you still feel this way? [If so]: Why? [If not]: What's changed? How much do you feel like your participation in the course has to do with that?

I want to thank you again for your time and for talking to me today. Is there anything that I missed that you'd like to add?

APPENDIX O:  
Interview Guide for Staff at Sites Other Than Midwest and Northeast Sites

[All]: Describe your affiliation (role) with the Clemente program.

[All]: How did you become involved? How long have you been involved? At what site(s)?

[For instructors]: Describe your professional background (i.e., is the subject you teach at Clemente one you also teach or have taught elsewhere, have been trained in, etc.?).

[For directors/coordinators/social workers]: Describe your professional background (i.e., did you have a background or experience in the humanities before this position?).

[For instructors]: Are you affiliated with any particular institution(s)? If so, which one(s) and in what capacity (e.g., professor, lecturer, etc.)?

[For instructors]: Characterize your experiences teaching in Clemente. What class do you teach? What is it like? What material do you cover and why? How would you describe the students? What are your relationships/interactions like with the students?

[For instructors]: Are there particular aspects of your course (e.g., readings, material/concepts, discussions) that seem to affect students? How so and whom does it appear to impact most (e.g., women, men, old, young, parents, etc.)? [For those who have taught in Clemente before]: Is this consistent from year to year? If so, why do you think that is?

[For directors/coordinators/social workers]: Characterize your experiences working with Clemente. What is it like? How would you describe the students? What are your relationships/interactions like with the students?

[For instructors who have taught or are teaching elsewhere]: How do your other teaching experiences (e.g., in academia) compare to teaching at Clemente (e.g., do you cover the same material?, in a different way?, are the discussions different in some way?, level of student commitment?, etc.)?

[All]: What do you see as the “goal” of the course? Do you think it achieves that goal? If so, how?

[All]: Do you perceive the course to be impactful? If so, in what ways and on whom? (e.g., impact on students, students who are parents, students’ families, community, instructors/staff, etc.). What are the underlying programmatic principles, practices, or features that you see as the most meaningful to students?

[All]: Have you witnessed any kind of change or development – positive or negative – among students as the course progresses? If so, describe.

[All]: What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses of the program? What do you see as the

strengths and weaknesses of the students?

[For directors/coordinators/social workers]: What are some of the challenges students encounter with persisting in the course? What supports are available to students?

[For social workers]: What is the role of social work in the course? What do you see as the relationship between social work and humanities education?

[For directors/coordinators]: How does a Clemente Course come into being at a given location? What are some of the challenges of keeping a course afloat? Is there a larger agenda for classes to proliferate in low-income communities across the US?

[For directors/coordinators]: Do you anticipate making any changes or enhancements to the program in the future? If so, what?

[For instructors]: Do you anticipate making any changes or enhancements to your class in the future? If so, what?

[For social workers]: Do you anticipate making any changes or enhancements to your role with Clemente and the students in the future? If so, what?