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Krista Hughes

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KRISTA HUGHES

Community-Building On Campus and Beyond

Although it is located in a small rural town in the middle of the state, Newberry College in a sense belongs to the entire state of South Carolina, which in turn sits on the unseeded lands of the Kusso, Yemassee, Santee, Cherokee, Saluda, and Catawba. Not only does the college have deep connections to the state's historic and cultural roots, but also its current student population mirrors the state's demographics.

Located 154 miles from Charleston, where approximately 40 percent of all enslaved Africans were brought into the United States, Newberry College owes its history to the practice of enslavement. The college's founder, Rev. Dr. John Bachmann, gave the opening blessing at the South Carolina Secession Convention, and he wrote eloquent theological defenses of the institution of slavery (curiously, even as he affirmed, in contrast to other scientific writer of his day, that whites and blacks were of the same species).

Fast forward to today and to who our students are: Newberry is one of the few schools in the state that nearly perfectly mirrors the demographics of South Carolina— in terms of race, gender, socio-economic status, and urban-versus-rural origins. A predominantly white institution, its proportion of minority students reflects the population of the state. Yet it is less reflective of the city and county of Newberry, where there is a slight majority of Black residents, with white residents close

in number and only a tiny percentage of Latinx and Asian residents. Socioeconomically, there is also mirroring, with the City posting a median income is \$31,000, while the student population of the college includes 50 percent first-generation students, 40 percent Pell-eligible students, and a little over 30 percent racial minority students (with significant overlap across these categories).



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Our "culture of community" has both promise and plenty of room for growth. On campus, we are trying to build a culture of true belonging, which is the central theme of the DEI Strategic Plan developed by a Presidential Task Force during the 2020-21 academic year. We conducted a campus-wide campus climate survey (HEDS) and have established a series of listening session opportunities for students to come and speak openly about concerns. Our student

Krista E. Hughes is the director of the Muller Center for Ethics, Vocation, and Civic Engagement and Associate Professor of Religion at Newberry College in Newberry, South Carolina. She is also a facilitator for the community transformation organization, *Speaking Down Barriers*. A white child of the South, she seeks to draw on the beauty and richness of the South's diverse people and cultures while reckoning alongside others with the region's destructive legacies.

orientations and student fairs have had more intentional aims to connect students not only across campus but with the broader community. Finally, in the last couple of years, students have established the Social Justice Club and Spectrum (for LGBTQ+ and allies) with campus-wide impact beyond their small membership sizes.

In and with the city of Newberry, the Muller Center for Exploration and Engagement is heavily involved with civic engagement activities—connecting students, staff, and faculty to opportunities for community-based learning and service opportunities. There's also a strong connection between the athletics department and the community, and the support travels in both directions. There is tremendous community support for the college's sports teams. In turn, our athletic teams lead the campus in volunteer work in the community, followed by the campus's Greek organizations and students in community-engagement courses.

The challenges of building a sense of community on campus and off are plenty, however. First and most central is a basic lack of time and energy. For students, staff, and faculty, schedules are packed with demanding commitments, while community-based education and relationship-building takes time. Even when the desire and will is there, there is scant breathing space.

"This draw to broader activist movements frequently orients students away from the local and toward the national and global issues."

Another challenge is the generational characteristics of Gen Z students, where there tends to be less focus on *service* and more on *activism*, often based on social media. This draw to broader activist movements frequently orients students away from the local and toward the national and global issues. The way technology can mobilize coalitions across space and time is nothing short of miraculous. The challenge is to not sacrifice local relationships and needs.

Whereas that is a challenge for students, there is a specific one for the personnel of Newberry College—namely, the fact that a large proportion of the upper administration and faculty, along with some staff, do not live in the city of Newberry. The community is small, and there is a widespread impression that there is not enough to do and/or the local public schools are not strong enough. This means, however, that the people who live in Newberry the city and the people who work at Newberry the college do not overlap as significantly as they could, which in turn impedes the development of organic relationships of trust, support, and collaboration.

And yet, there are ample signs of hope. Where city-college relationships are good, they are really strong. The mayor and Newberry City Council regularly recognize the college as the largest provider of volunteers in the city, and annually the city holds a ceremony to honor those graduating seniors who have shown strong service to the city during their time as Newberry College students. In addition, there are alumni and alumnae who have chosen to remain in the community following graduation; several now serve in influential positions in the city—from city administration to churches to the local newspaper.

What is more, civic leaders from the community and the campus are currently involved in two significant projects: Coming Together for Newberry, an alliance of people seeking to practice and advance interracial engagement and understanding in Newberry County, and the Gallman School Project, an initiative to acquire and renovate the historically significant Black high school and establish a community center that will provide a range of services and opportunities for the surrounding community.

Finally, the growing number of international corporations coming to the area promises to turn little Newberry into a global city where the possibilities for collaboration among the town, the college, and the business industry will grow.

There is plenty of room to grow in terms of community-building on campus and beyond. There is also a great deal of promise, rooted primarily in the already rich relationships that are possible only in a small town.