

TRINITY COLLEGE AND CONNECTICUT STATE  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE CAPITAL:

## LIBERAL ARTS ACTION LAB

### QUICK FACTS

Year founded: **2018**

Project source: **Community**

Duration: **Semester-long**

Students per year: **40**

Interdisciplinary: **Yes**

Vertical integration: **No**

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## PROGRAM SUMMARY

The Liberal Arts Action Lab (LAAL) engages research teams of students and faculty from CT State Community College Capital and Trinity College to investigate questions posed by Hartford community partners. Founded in 2018 and located at Trinity's downtown Hartford campus, LAAL aims to produce community-driven, participatory action research by allowing Hartford partners — neighborhood groups, nonprofit organizations, government agencies and social entrepreneurs — to propose research projects. Semester-long projects are then selected in collaboration with a Hartford Resident Advisory Board.

Each semester, Trinity and Capital students apply to join Action Lab project teams and enroll in two courses. In Action Research Methods, they learn research skills and digital tools. In a Hartford Research Project course, they collaborate with faculty and a community partner to pursue a research question important to the community. Each project team is led by one member of the LAAL faculty who guides the research and is supported by an additional faculty fellow with project-related expertise. At the end of the semester, each of the project teams presents findings at a public digital poster session.

Since 2018, LAAL has hosted 214 students across 48 interdisciplinary projects that incorporate elements from the arts, humanities and social and health sciences. In a typical semester, 14 students from Trinity and five students from Capital work across three to four project teams. All projects culminate in a website that preserves findings for the community partner and broader public. Projects can be perused [here](#) and include the following examples:

The Action Lab is a partnership between a liberal arts college and a community college, with students from each institution bringing valuable skills and learning to partner on diverse teams.

**The Black Heritage Project:** In spring 2020, CT State Capital's [Hartford Heritage Project](#) and the [Hartford History Center](#) (HHC) at the Hartford Public Library asked students to research the history of Hartford's first Black church, create an online exhibit and make recommendations on how to bring its history out of the shadows and into the lived experience of the city. The LAAL project team conducted archival research and spoke with members of the extant congregation. The findings inspired a [\\$150,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant](#) that has put three LAAL recommendations into action: 1) creating a K-12 local history curriculum; 2) producing a long-standing exhibit; and 3) establishing an annual public lecture on race in America, named after the historic church's renowned pastor Reverend James Pennington. A Capital student reflected on her participation in this [blog](#).

**The Frog Hollow Oral History Project:** In fall 2021, the [Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance \(SINA\)](#) asked the Action Lab to document the history of Hartford's Latinx-dominant Frog Hollow neighborhood through the firsthand knowledge of its residents, with the long-term goal of constructing a bilingual walking tour. Through oral history interviews and archival research, student researchers assembled a bilingual [multimedia archive](#) documenting the neighborhood's history and present. The research team identified four paths for the walking tour: [Community Spaces](#), [Public Art](#), [Frog Hollow Heroes](#) and [Voices of Frog Hollow](#). Stops along each path were paired with relevant photos, interviews or data. While the LAAL project lasted only a semester, the partnership was carried forward through Trinity's [Center for Hartford Engagement and Research](#), with students in the [Community Action Gateway](#) and [Public Humanities Collaborative](#) bringing the tour to fruition. Trinity highlighted the project's culmination [here](#) and a Trinity student from the original LAAL team reflected on her participation in [this blog](#).

**The Immigrant Welcoming Project:** In spring 2023, two Hartford city councilors from [Connecticut's Working Families Party](#) asked the Action Lab to investigate the feasibility of establishing a city-supported immigrant welcoming center. The research team investigated best

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practices for welcoming immigrants across U.S. cities, examined cities demographically and politically similar to Hartford with effective models, and interviewed community leaders from Hartford-based immigrant-serving organizations to gauge their views on a city-sponsored center. Based on these findings, the team presented a policy brief recommending that Hartford first invest in an infrastructure to sustain a relationship of trust with the immigrant community. Specifically, they recommended hiring a liaison for immigrant affairs, creating an immigrant council with broad representation and working with [Welcoming America](#) to become a certified "Welcoming City." In fall 2023, Hartford's newly elected mayor formed an Immigration Task Force and is drawing on the findings of the project to develop next steps.

More recently, a [spring 2024 project](#) examining the need for a state child tax credit (in partnership with the United Way of CT) presented testimony at the state capitol, held a press conference and garnered attention in city and state news coverage. As the Action Lab's reputation grows, recent project presentations have attracted a range of community nonprofit leaders, two city council members, two city hall employees and the superintendent of schools, along with students, faculty and administrators from local higher education institutions.

## RESOURCES AND ADMINISTRATIVE MODEL

As an educational partnership between [Trinity College](#) and [CT State Community College Capital](#), the Action Lab is situated within two distinct higher education institutions. At Trinity, the Action Lab resides within the [Center for Hartford Engagement and Research](#) (CHER). CHER synergizes the efforts of five academic and co-curricular community engagement programs across Trinity, with the goal of strengthening mutually beneficial partnerships between the College and Hartford. CHER's director of academic programs (reporting to the dean of faculty's office) oversees LAAL in collaboration with the LAAL coordinator and a shared program manager. Both the director and the coordinator also serve as the LAAL's main instructors. The Trinity-funded LAAL team coordinates with Capital's LAAL faculty director, who manages Capital's participation. In addition, faculty fellows from Hartford higher education institutions receive a \$1,000 stipend for partnering with a project for a semester, resulting in a \$6,000–\$10,000 expense per year.

Beyond personnel expenses, the Action Lab has an annual operating budget from Trinity of \$22,400, which is used for project costs, technology and equipment, faculty development, student worker wages, publicity and events. Within this budget, each project is allotted \$500 for research expenses, including compensating participants, purchasing data or software and supporting team field trips. Well-justified expenses can exceed the \$500 limit. In addition, Capital supports the following costs: a course release for its faculty director, parking spaces and a \$12,000 annual contribution toward personnel expenses.

## BEST PRACTICES AND LESSONS LEARNED

The Action Lab “flips the script” of typical higher education community engagement by empowering community partners and residents to propose and prioritize research projects ([Brown, Dougherty & Partridge, 2022](#)). Projects thus reflect community needs and interests rather than elite research agendas. The Action Lab then trains undergraduates in participatory action research while simultaneously allowing them to apply those skills in project-based learning. Lastly, the Action Lab is a partnership between a liberal arts college and a community college, with students from each institution bringing valuable skills and learning to partner on diverse teams.

**Community-driven and community-engaged research projects:** To ensure that projects address the priorities of Hartford residents, the Action Lab implemented a unique model through which community partners propose research projects, which are then evaluated by a Hartford Resident Advisory Board (HRAB). Using a mailing list and networking, the Action Lab recruits an average of 12–15 proposals annually. The HRAB then reviews the proposals and prioritizes a small number to be announced to students and faculty. During registration period for the following semester, students and faculty apply to join project teams that match their interests and expertise. Prior to the semester, the LAAL instructional team meets with the partner and faculty fellow to scope the project and prepare a syllabus. Thereafter, the partner and faculty fellow meet with the research team monthly to guide and evaluate progress.

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In total, the Action Lab has received 143 proposals from organizations in every Hartford neighborhood and implemented 48 projects that address a wide range of interdisciplinary subjects such as [home ownership](#), [creative placemaking](#), [career growth for food service workers](#) and [Puerto Rican migrant needs following Hurricane Maria](#). Through [digital poster fair presentations](#) and [project websites](#), research teams share their projects with their partners and the broader Hartford community.

**Participatory research methods and interdisciplinary project-based learning:** For students, the Action Lab is a unique and intensive two-course learning experience coupling research methods instruction with interdisciplinary project-based learning. Each semester, all LAAL students take LAAL 200: Action Research Methods in Hartford, in which they learn about the city, the ethics of community-based engagement, and participatory research methods including collecting and analyzing qualitative and quantitative data. Each student also participates in a second course, applying these methods through a community-engaged research project (LAAL 201/202: Hartford Research Project). Project teams are typically between five and nine students. The courses are held at Trinity's downtown Hartford campus and typically involve local field work, requiring students from both institutions to regularly leave their main campus and engage in the community.

**Higher education institutional partnership:** The innovative partnership between Trinity and CT State Capital has been a major benefit for student learning and project outcomes. Capital students are more likely to have long-term roots in Hartford and often have prior work experience, bringing local expertise that few Trinity students possess. Community partners appreciate this local knowledge and students from both institutions learn by bridging the divide between their different college experiences. The partnership also contributes to the interdisciplinarity of projects, with Capital's programs in business and health supplementing both institutions' liberal arts disciplines.

# CHALLENGES AND PRIORITIES FOR THE FUTURE

A credit-bearing program that prioritizes community needs, develops actionable public-facing outcomes and provides a valuable learning experience for students from two vastly different higher education institutions does not come without its challenges, in terms of resources and managing community and institutional partnerships. The Action Lab has evolved over its first five years of operation and will continue to do so in response to these challenges.

**RESOURCE INTENSIVENESS:** The Liberal Arts Action Lab requires a significant institutional commitment for a program that serves roughly 20 students and two to four community partners per semester. Because the 20 students take one class together (research methods), and then two to four project classes separately, each semester LAAL hosts three to five classes running simultaneously. From 2018 to 2020, the Action Lab operated with a single director who not only managed student, faculty and partner recruiting, but also taught all of the courses (with the support of a half-time program assistant). The teaching load of five courses per semester was twice Trinity's typical course load and, unsurprisingly, proved unsustainable. Even with a small number of students, instructing project courses is challenging since each new project requires distinct preparation, often including literature outside the faculty member's area of expertise. Moreover, project classes have higher stakes than a typical course since they facilitate a community partnership and produce public-facing products. In addition to this steep course load, LAAL faculty face a perpetual recruiting cycle of community proposals, students and faculty fellows.

In response to these challenges, since fall 2021, the Action Lab has divided teaching responsibility between two faculty members who each teach one to two courses a semester, while also managing recruiting and administration, for a total of 2.5 FTE, including a shared program manager. While this solution is more sustainable for the faculty members, it is also more resource-intensive for the institution, which can make the program vulnerable during moments of college leadership transition. Going forward, the Action Lab aims to identify ways to recruit more Trinity and Capital faculty members to teach courses in the LAAL through their annual teaching unit allotment. This will connect existing teaching resources to the Action Lab and diversify the disciplinary expertise of LAAL faculty. However, achieving this goal will require creative thinking since many faculty members must focus on in-demand, required courses in their departments. Moreover, to ensure that projects remain driven by the community and not faculty, we will need to align the timing of project selection with faculty course planning. Alongside this goal and to reduce administrative burden, LAAL has moved to recruiting proposals once a year for the entire subsequent academic year, rather than administering two recruitment periods.

**COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES:** While the Action Lab remains firmly committed to its community-driven model, differing schedules and incentives between community partners and higher education constituents can present challenges. While community partners propose

projects they care about and agree to a schedule of participation in advance, LAAL projects are understandably not always the community partner's highest priority. This presents particular challenges given the semester-long project timeframe. In the course of the semester, LAAL faculty are leading students in both learning and implementing research methods — building the plane and flying it in only three months. During this short period, students must understand community partner needs and related literature; obtain approval for an IRB application to protect human subject ethics; implement the proposed research; identify findings; and distill them in a public project website and presentation.

Over time, the Action Lab has learned to scope project expectations and work effectively with Trinity's relatively nimble IRB. An ongoing challenge, however, is periodic delays in communication with community partners that can set back an already ambitious schedule. Most critically, if a community partner is not able to follow through on promised outreach to constituents, students may lack research participants within the needed timeframe. To address these challenges, the Action Lab has developed a signed partner memorandum of understanding in addition to existing written and in-person communications. We are also considering a stipend for the community partner charged with directly interacting with the project team. Sometimes organizational leaders propose projects but then delegate them to staff members with differing priorities, leading to delays. Lastly, we are considering a model in which at least some projects will continue across multiple semesters as they are brought to fruition by different student teams. Project products will improve with longer timeframes; however, the Action Lab will serve fewer community partners, a critical tradeoff that requires further consideration.

**INSTITUTIONAL PARTNERSHIP CHALLENGES:** As outlined in the previous section, creating a partnership between a private liberal arts college and a public community college offers important benefits. However, this partnership also presents challenges. Some of these challenges are misalignments that require careful planning and communication, like differences in semester schedules, course credits and major requirements. Registration and major requirements are a significant barrier to recruitment at Capital. LAAL courses need to be transferred into Capital majors as substitutions for existing requirements. This requires individualized advising with each potential applicant and customized registration. During the early phases of the pandemic, many Capital students faced significant challenges that temporarily slowed recruiting. The partnership also requires proactive attention to team dynamics. Differences between students at the two institutions are an opportunity for group members to learn from each other and for teams to produce more nuanced work, but they can also lead to friction as assumptions and biases emerge. Thus, it is essential to build rapport and ensure communication about group dynamics. Lastly, the partnership is facilitated by its location at Trinity's downtown campus, in proximity to Capital, but this remote location also presents challenges for student transportation and securing IT and technical assistance that is more readily available on the main campus.

The preceding challenges call for creative solutions around attracting additional faculty to teach through the Action Lab, greater consideration of project timeframes and community partner capacity, and continued attention to institutional partnership dynamics on the micro and macro levels. In addition to these goals, the LAAL team sees several opportunities for promising future development that build on LAAL's unique community-driven model.

**The Action Lab as an intermediary between Metro Hartford's resources and Hartford's priorities:** Metro Hartford is among the nation's wealthiest metro areas, while Hartford is among the poorest cities. Many metro area residents commute into the city for daytime work or evening entertainment, but take their resources home with them to suburban communities. As businesses and individual donors become more interested in philanthropic work that advances social justice, Hartford businesses or donors may welcome the opportunity to fund and participate in projects identified by local organizations. Hartford-based professionals could complete pro bono hours as "community fellows" on LAAL projects, bolstering the networks and learning of students and partners.

**The Action Lab as a pipeline for engaged learning and scholarship:** The projects and partnerships identified through the community-driven LAAL process can serve as a pipeline for engaged learning and scholarship locally and beyond. Undergraduate projects initially contribute to partners' needs, but once these partnerships are formed, they could be taken further by scholarly teams with compatible research interests. Researchers often want to work with community organizations but face challenges in developing those connections. The Action Lab generates a regular stream of readily available partners with clearly articulated needs.

**The Action Lab as a center for Hartford higher education collaboration:** The existing Trinity-Capital partnership offers a model for an expanded institutional collaboration that would bring additional skills to the Action Lab, including graduate students and other researchers.

**Trinity is an independent, nonsectarian liberal arts institution located in the capital city of Hartford, Connecticut. With more than 2,100 full-time undergraduate students and 91 graduate students, Trinity's student body is diverse, representing 41 states and 70 countries, with 21% of U.S. students of color and 50% who identify as women.**

**CT State Community College Capital is an open-admission, two-year educational institution in downtown Hartford, Connecticut. A federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution, Capital serves 2,500 students who are: 37% Black, 33% Hispanic, an average age of 29, and 75% residing in Hartford or neighboring towns.**