

Assignment 4: Significant Communities

Goal: Identify, investigate, and evaluate a specific group or community you would like to learn more about. It might be a professional, civic, social, awareness-raising, or other community or group. Gather as much information about this community or group as you can, including its history, practices, values, priorities, and impact. This is a culminating activity that requires you to draw on the work we have done previously and to gather your own resources similar to those used in previous assignments (e.g., theoretical, historical, and practical readings, podcasts, interviews). Your aim is to determine the extent to which this community enables or constrains the ability of its members (or others) to live a life of significance as you have come to understand it.

Role: You are a social and cultural critic who seeks an understanding and assessment of a specific community or group. To criticize is to judge the merits and faults of something. As such, social and cultural critics judge the merits and faults of the culture as a whole and specific groups within it. As a critic, you are well-versed in what it means to live a life of significance, and so you seek to investigate a community or social group and assess the extent to which this group exemplifies, complicates, or challenges your understanding of what it means to live a life of significance.

Audience: Your audience is other members of your society, including members of the Birmingham-Southern community and your peers in the first-year class interested in what it means to live a life of significance.

Situation/Challenge: The challenge involves identifying a specific group, developing a deep understanding of this group (its history, practices, and impacts), and evaluating this group against the criteria you have articulated about living a life of significance. You want to understand this group on its own terms (that is, respect it) and then evaluate those terms against your understanding of what it means to live a life of significance (that is, critique it). Effective social critics are not dogmatic; as such, your investigation may prompt you to modify or alter your initial understandings of what it means to live a life of significance. The challenge is to balance understanding the group in its own terms against your assessment of the group's merits and faults for enabling its members and others to live a life of significance.

Different sections of IDS 142 may approach this project in different ways. For example, your section may investigate a single group or community; alternatively, your class may divide into groups to investigate related communities or groups; or your class may determine that each student investigate a group or community of their own. Check with your instructor to determine your class's approach.

In general, select a specific, identifiable group that you can research and place in social and historical context. To be workable, your group selection should be *locatable* and *bounded*, as well as *describable*, *measurable*, or *countable*. That is, be sure you can pinpoint this group in time and space (where is it and when are the members present?), determine some level of

continuity, stability, or self-identification of membership (who is and who is not a member of this group and would they recognize themselves as such?), and provide a reasonable description of the group (can we measure its size and name it with some confidence?). “People who use Apple products” would not be a good group selection for this project because, although there might be some shared behaviors and values of these individuals, membership and participation is transitory, if even acknowledged. However, if there is a student group or local club who focuses on Apple products in some way, such a group would be workable.

Some examples of groups might include, but are not exclusive to: specific student groups, including groups that serve particular identity groups or constituencies on the BSC campus or have affiliations with larger, national organizations (e.g., SGA, Black Student Union, Spectrum, Bonner Leaders, or fraternal or sorority groups); religious or social communities (e.g., a local church, mosque, or temple, a local chapter of Kiwanis club, or a bowling team); professional communities, including academic communities (e.g., chemists, sociologists, social workers); specific sites where professionals practice or conduct their work (e.g., a medical unit in Birmingham, a particular law office, or the Birmingham city council); neighborhoods or cities (e.g., any of the neighborhood groups representing the 99 communities in Birmingham, each of whom have formal members and meet at least once per month); activist, advocacy, or social service groups (e.g., the United Way, the Birmingham Community Foundation, the Birmingham chapter of Black Lives Matter, Alabama Arise).

Whatever group you choose, you want to maintain both investment and critical distance from the group. This may sound contradictory; it is paradoxical: by investment we mean that you are interested in the group, that you value it for its own sake and want to find what is useful, productive, meaningful, and important about the group for its members and others (you want to believe in this group); by critical distance we mean that you must imagine how the group might be differently perceived, both internally and externally. That is, you will want to evaluate the group on terms separate from those used by the group itself, by criteria that others might employ—namely, the criteria we have developed previously in this course for living a life of significance. Put simply, neither advertising copy (investment without distance) nor judgmental dismissal (distance without investment) will do. The project requires both.

In all cases, you should research

- the history of the group, including its founding and history of membership,
- the practices central to the group’s work (including the work they conduct, the structure of the group, the clients or stakeholders they serve, the knowledge or information they hold in common, as well as how one becomes a member, sustains membership, demonstrates membership, and serves as a good member),
- the values or priorities that animate this group,
- the impact this group has on its members, clients (if appropriate), and the world at large,
- and, to the extent possible, the social, political, or historical context of groups like this one.

The core aim of your investigations is to determine the extent to which this group enables or constrains the possibility of its members and others to live a life of significance. You should review written materials, conduct direct observations, search archives, hold interviews, and use other means to research your group and place them in the context of other groups like them.

Product/Performance: You have considerable latitude in what you produce for this project. Be creative. You can create anything that demonstrates a deep and respectful understanding of this group, including its core practices, and your assessment of this group in terms of living a life of significance: teach your audience about the group and provide your assessment of it. Your product might include, but is not limited to, a video, a theatrical performance, a comic book or comic sequence, a scientific or reflective poster, a podcast, or a poem or painting—and, of course, a written report. Some products may require additional commentary (e.g., a painting with an artist's explanation of how the painting fulfills the two criteria of understanding and critique). Your product will be showcased as part of a celebration for all sections of IDS 142.

In addition to this final product, include a brief, two-page narrative on how your thinking and understanding has developed during this project. Specifically, talk about how your thinking about research, community, living a life of significance, understanding others, and criticism has developed or changed as a result of this project. Be specific. The audience for this reflective statement is yourself, your classmates, and the instructor.

Standards: An effective main project will provide the audience with the history, core practices, and impact of the community under investigation—either through visual, auditory, or written means. These details will be based on library and other research (including direct observations and interviews with members). It will also provide a reasoned and sound assessment (including consideration of any counter views) of the capacity of this group to enable or constrain the possibility of living a life of significance.

The reflective narrative that accompanies your project will tell a detailed and rich story of your project development and what that project development has meant for you. (This narrative is separate from any artist statements or other materials that might accompany the project proper, although there may be overlap in terms of content.)