Ms. Higgins leads Syracuse University’s Office of Community Engagement and Economic Development which was established 6 years ago by SU Chancellor Nancy Cantor to implement the University’s two major place-based urban initiatives. The Connective Corridor is a green urban redevelopment streetscape project, transportation system and cultural corridor traversing an interstate highway that divided the City of Syracuse in the 1960’s and reconnecting University Hill to downtown Syracuse. The Near Westside Initiative is a place based revitalization project in one of the poorest neighborhoods in the U.S.

In addition to advancing the two $50m development projects in traditional ways, Chancellor Cantor tasked this office with cultivating a new, collaborative, civil infrastructure, comprised of faculty, students and community members to guide and sustain each effort. The resulting unlikely coalitions have fostered deep bonded relationships across age, race, class and occupation. These coalitions are often uncomfortable at first but they are propelling the projects forward and creating a more dynamic and participatory framework for urban redevelopment.
In the case of the Near Westside Initiative, a collaborative not-for-profit corporation was created and is housed at the University’s Office of Community Engagement and Economic Development and staffed by a University employee. However, the effort is clearly being led by a diverse, now cohesive, coalition of neighborhood residents, organizations, artists, technologists and community and academic leaders. This unlikely coalition has become a lightning rod for broad participation in shaping the neighborhood’s future.

On the Connective Corridor, unique interdisciplinary solutions to traditional urban challenges, like increasing bus ridership, diverting storm water runoff and activating urban plazas, are being unearthed by joining previously disconnected experts. These individuals, along with students, faculty, the City’s young professionals and cultural and artistic leaders are now interacting productively with the engineers and civil servants traditionally associated with a public infrastructure project of this size and scope. An unlikely coalition of faithful project advocates is developing for the Connective Corridor.

Ms. Higgins will lead a discussion on four of the conditions and transformative practices that create powerful unlikely coalitions like those in Syracuse’s Near Westside neighborhood and explore with the conference attendees the potential impact of this new democratic civil infrastructure on urban revitalization in the U.S.
Practice Humility and Inclusion

A fundamental component of effective anchor institution work, particularly in distressed communities where power relationships seem out of balance, is earning trust. Ed Bogucz, Professor of Engineering, Director of the Syracuse Center of Excellence (COE) and founding member of the NWSI Board of Directors will describe how the COE earned the trust of neighborhood residents. Mary Alice Smothers, longtime neighborhood activist will describe what the University did wrong in the past and right this time. Ms. Higgins will describe how even changing traditional development rituals like groundbreakings and grand openings can unite people, reinforce local project ownership and ignite participation.
Try a Bold Experiment

It was outrageous for the School of Architecture to invite some of the best designers in the world to compete to build an extreme green home on a 40 foot lot in one of the poorest neighborhoods in America. Assistant Director of Upstate, a division in the School of Architecture and neighborhood resident and NWSI Vice-Chair Carole Horan will discuss how being bold and engaging residents on the jury of the International Design competition “From the Ground Up” resulted in the construction of three fabulous and unique homes, the attraction of three new families to the neighborhood and the attendance of over 200 residents at a neighborhood open house preceding their sale. The homes were ultimately featured on the cover of Dwell Magazine and became a source of pride for neighborhood residents. Professor Julia Czerniak will discuss another bold experiment entitled “Movement on Main” which will engage residents in designing the first “Healthy Main Street in America”.

Carole Horan, Longtime Neighborhood Resident Near Westside Initiative Vice-Chairman

Joseph Sisko, Asst. Director Syracuse University School of Architecture

Julia Czerniak, Professor Syracuse University School of Architecture
Bring in the Music

Music has always formed unlikely coalitions of devotees. Combining music with neighborhood revitalization can unite and energize people in extraordinary ways. The Knight Foundation’s extensive “Soul Poll” research indicates that three things really attach people to their communities: the social offerings; how welcoming a place is; and the aesthetics. Music has the uncanny ability to infuse all of these factors into a place simultaneously. Executive Director of CNY Jazz, Larry Luttinger and neighborhood resident and sound studio owner Isaac Rothwell will discuss the impact of bringing jazz to a park in the center of the Near Westside, previously best known as the site of a fatal shooting.
Honor All Generations

Director of Community Initiatives at SU’s downtown location, the Warehouse, Stephen Mahan runs SU’s Literacy through Photography program. Stephen can be seen any day of the week walking around one of Syracuse’s neighborhoods with a happy line of children following behind him, carrying cameras and peering into the cracks of sidewalks. The decision to fill the vacant windows of the largest deteriorating structure in the neighborhood with the faces and aspirations of neighborhood children truly catalyzed the Near Westside Initiative. Stephen and Leah Tucker, a neighborhood teenager who announced to the world on one of these posters her intention to become a Supreme Court Justice, will discuss the impact that engaging neighborhood youth has had on the democratization and credibility of the NWSI.