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Community Engagement Fellows Project Report
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Project Title: Enjoying the process: Forming health-based community connections

As a clinical psychologist specializing in eating- and weight-related disorders, I strongly identify as an applied clinical researcher. I am passionate about research, and one of my favorite activities at Western is mentoring students in the research process. I always have the “so what?” of research in mind; I can appreciate that building knowledge is important in and of itself, but in my own work, I also prioritize the connection to the real world (e.g., “so what does this mean for people who suffer?”)

When I joined the Community Engagement fellows in the Fall of 2016, I envisioned that my fellows project would involve carving out a community-based participatory research project, and I was quite excited by this idea. After all, what is more “real world” than a research project informed by an agency serving the community? And yet, shortly after the Community Engagement program began, I realized two things: (1) my time felt quite limited, and (2) it was not in the spirit of community collaboration to rush into a community research partnership (especially since I did not have any particular relationships already established). Some of our early activities in the Community Engagement meetings were particularly useful in highlighting these two obstacles, particularly when we explored the difference between traditional information generation (e.g., within academia) versus truly community-informed practice. These conversations and activities helped to adjust my expectations and shift my priorities about the product of this fellowship. With the excellent support of Travis and my Tuesday afternoon cohort, I decided to instead take my fellows project in a more process-oriented direction: to commit to building a network of colleagues in health and wellness-related fields (with a focus on mental health connections).

The project goal of building connections felt timely. I teach 5 classes per year in abnormal psychology at Western and I mentor between 5-10 undergraduate and graduate students in research each year; in these roles, I frequently provide formal and informal advising on preparing for careers in the mental health field. I regularly suggest that students obtain direct experience working with vulnerable populations through volunteer work or research experiences, and so increasing the number of connections I have with community members in health-related areas (e.g., in community-based mental health programs, in mental health/wellness promotion positions in schools) would inform volunteer opportunities for my advisees so that I could direct them to agencies that match their specific interests.

But if I’m being honest, while I was excited about my project, it didn’t feel like it connected to what I truly desired: a community partnership that would result in applied research opportunities. I was hard on myself, and felt like making a list of connections made me a “lazy fellow” who was underachieving compared to my

peers. Nevertheless, I believed the project was important, and I set out making connections with health-based community members (typically over a coffee at Café Adagio where I would often run into other community engagement fellows!) Many people helped to connect me to others doing similar work, and I am grateful for this “snowball” approach to contact-making. I began to build up a list of agencies in Whatcom County doing important work in improving the mental health of the community. I had many great conversations and I gained some invaluable deeper knowledge of local resources. I was continually reminded that the process was vital; I learned that the connections themselves were an important product of my fellowship year. I am grateful that my fellowship year unfolded in exactly this way, as I think that becoming less focused on one big outcome and more trusting of the way the process can unfold was exactly the lesson I needed to learn (and one I learned to enjoy!)

Perhaps *because* I let go of my expectations for the perfect community-based research opportunity, one presented itself in the end. During Spring quarter, I was exploring a series of new connection to the Bellingham Schools Wellness Advisory Group and Common Threads, a farm-to-table organization focused on bringing gardening and nutrition-based education to Bellingham schools (<http://commonthreadsfarm.org/>). I met with Laura Plaut, the Founder and Director of Common Threads, and after sharing mutual excitement for nutritional education and holistic evaluation of intervention practices, we decided to form a partnership doing longitudinal evaluation of Common Threads’ activities in Whatcom and surrounding counties. The details of this partnership are still unfolding. I’ve been lucky to have a dedicated undergraduate student involved in the planning process along the way, and I’m excited about additional opportunities for my research students in the future.

While I am thrilled that the Community Engagement Fellowship ultimately ended in an emerging research partnership, I understand that this just one small piece of this experience. I so enjoyed the process of forming relationships and I look forward to continuing to build my list of connections to mental health-serving agencies in Whatcom county and letting additional connections unfold (research-based or otherwise!)