

Community Engagement Fellows Activity Report – 2015-16

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Background

In Winter quarter of 2013, with the assistance of several undergraduate students, I prepared a report entitled “Current status and future prospects for community engagement of psychology students at Western Washington University.” This report sought to address the following four questions:

- 1) How does community engagement relate to the missions of the department and the university?
- 2) What community engagement activities are currently taking place in the department?
- 3) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the current efforts?
- 4) If there are areas where the department is not as strong as it could be, what steps could be taken to improve?

The report found, based on consideration of a variety of data, that the major area of weakness within the department was community engagement experiences for undergraduate students. The report concluded with the following statement:

“Thus, given a goal of increasing the number of undergraduate students participating in community engagement activities, our short-term recommendation would be to create or expand credit-bearing community experiences for undergraduates where this can be supported using existing resources. Our longer-term recommendation would be to increase incentives for faculty to supervise these community experiences and/or find ways to incorporate those experiences into activities which faculty are already doing.”

I sent this report to the department chair, who expressed little interest in addressing this issue at the departmental level. I also approached individual faculty members in the department about the possibility of teaming up to improve our community engagement offerings. The general theme of those discussions was some interest in the idea, but that the faculty member was too busy with other obligations to commit to it (highlighting the long-term recommendation mentioned above). Thus, in spring of 2013, I launched, on my own, the Volunteer Plus program in psychology, with the goal of implementing the short-term recommendation.

Volunteer Plus

The Volunteer Plus program is an internship-style program following a service-learning model. Students make a year-long commitment and go through a rigorous application process, including a written form, an interview, and reference checks. The program is a service-learning model in that there is both a service component with a community partner and an academic component that I oversee. The service

component involves 30 hours per quarter of work directly benefitting the community partner. The academic component involves reading and writing responses to several papers per quarter, along with a reflective essay that is due at the end of each quarter. In return, students receive 2 credits per quarter of directed independent study credit. This is the same mechanism that is typically used within the Psychology Department to provide credit for students working as research assistants in faculty research labs.

This quarter concludes the third year of the Volunteer Plus program. During that time, 12 undergraduate students have participated in the program, for an average of 2.4 quarters each, for about 870 hours of direct service to the community partners. I've worked with three different community partners: Brigid Collins Family Support Center, Sterling Meadows, and Bellingham Technical College.

However, the third year has been a difficult one. The partnership with Bellingham Technical College was actually initiated last spring by a staff member at BTC, who had a very exciting idea for a collaboration to support GED students. I recruited and vetted students and ended up placing two students on the BTC project. However, the BTC staff member left for another job right after the beginning of the year, and the partnership gradually deteriorated, to the point where both students elected not to continue for the spring quarter. A similar but less drastic issue with staff changes occurred with Brigid Collins. Fortunately I have worked with them all three years, so we've already navigated through a few bumps in the road, and I have a good relationship with the director. However, my new contact for day-to-day communication has been doing the work of 1 ½ staff members, with the result that it can take days if not weeks for her to respond to questions and inquiries. Consequently, the student I placed with Brigid Collins has been mostly left to figure out what to do on her own. Finally, although I've had very good experiences working with Sterling Meadows, despite great efforts I was unable to recruit any students to place there this year.

Plan for the Community Engagement Fellowship

In coming into the community engagement fellowship this year, my plan was to determine how to reinvigorate the Volunteer Plus program so that it would be sustainable in the long term. I interpreted the difficulties with recruitment and maintaining relationships with partners as at least partly reflecting the fact that I was stretched thin, and thus couldn't put as much time and energy into those activities as I would have liked. I had a tentative two-part vision for how this reinvigoration of the program was going to take place.

First, to aid with recruitment, Volunteer Plus would be proposed as a regular course, so it would be listed in Classfinder. This was intended to reduce the reliance on word-of-mouth advertising and asking my colleagues to announce the opportunity in their classes. Based on what I heard from participating students, coming into this year my colleagues had become less willing to participate in the annual ritual of plugging the program to their students yet again, perhaps due to the seemingly ever-increasing number of requests faculty receive to convey one message or another to their students.

Second, I would extend my search for partners and look outside the department to identify faculty who were interested and willing to share the workload with me. In particular, I was hoping to find a colleague

in another department who was involved in a similar sort of program, and where an interdisciplinary collaboration between psychology and another discipline would allow us to provide an enhanced learning experience for our students and to offer a broader range of professional expertise to a community partner. My thinking was that we would each still be responsible for recruitment and oversight of students from our discipline, but that we could share the work of building and maintaining the relationship with the community partner, and overseeing the project that the students were working on.

Although I was certainly interesting in talking with the other community fellows, learning what they were doing, and sharing ideas, a big reason for my participation in the program was to provide some motivation and accountability for actually putting this plan into action.

Development of Thinking During the Community Engagement Fellowship

As anticipated, participating in the CE Fellows cohort meetings and forums did provide me with considerable motivation. However, and as I should have suspected, it also caused me to ask a lot of new questions, and challenge many of my assumptions. On the one hand, this has created delays in my original plan. For example, I am not yet prepared to put forward a course proposal for Volunteer Plus. However, I believe that taking some extra time has been important in ensuring that the next steps are well thought-out and likely to succeed.

I had initially assumed that I should keep my focus on serving the external community (i.e., outside Western). This assumption was predicated on two beliefs. The first was that there was more need in the external community than at Western, i.e., that on average members of the greater Bellingham community experienced more challenges and were more disadvantaged than members of the Western community. The second belief was that getting off Western's campus would provide a more valuable learning experience for students.

However, as fall quarter unfolded, events on campus made clear that Western faces very significant challenges itself. And I was reminded of a passage from one of my favorite articles on community engagement, published in 2009 by Tessa Hicks Peterson:

“...my students asked a sweatshop labor-rights advocate in Mexico what they, as US activists and scholars, could do to support his group's struggle against the egregious worker rights violations committed by transnational factory employers. Without skipping a beat, he said: Stay home. Work on ending your own country's racism, sexism, and imperialism. Globalization is the new imperialism. You can help us by staying home and working with your own corporations and government. Get rid of that president of yours that keeps us in war. You see, at least in Mexico we know we are poor and that we aren't living in a democracy. In the United States, you live under the illusion that you are living in a democracy. (Anonymous advocate, 5 April 2008, Tijuana, Mexico) As I translated his assertions to the class, I could see the shock, guilt, and lastly understanding flash across my students' faces. I believe, for the first time really, they began to problematize the romantic notion of going 'out there' to do good without first seeing what's to be done at home to prevent further harm 'out there'.”

Over the course of the year, I realized that I myself might be succumbing to “the romantic notion of going ‘out there’ to do good.” So I began asking a new question: Where could I focus my efforts so that my students could have the best balance of a good learning experience and making a positive impact?

Based on a suggestion from Travis Tennesen, I scheduled a meeting with Karen Stout, who is the director of the Morse Institute for Leadership. Our discussion drew my attention to the large number of students on campus who are serving our own Western community through various sorts of leadership roles. Furthermore, it reminded me of previous work I had done along these lines, in particular, the Psyched Up program.

The Psyched Up program was a predecessor of the Volunteer Plus program. The mission of Psyched Up was to provide better support to psychology majors from their first interest in our major to graduation and beyond. The way the program worked is that I recruited several students to serve as Student Advisors, and these students earned directed independent study credit for their efforts. These students would work on specific projects that we collectively decided on. For example, a group of Student Advisors and I co-taught an experimental class called Careers in Psychology, which we offered in two consecutive years. This class was a response to students feeling like they didn’t know what they could do with a psychology major aside from going to graduate school. The Student Advisors were responsible for helping to decide on the content for the class, gathering and presenting information, and creating in-class activities and take-home assignments. One of the Student Advisors put together an on-line manual for the class as an Honors Thesis. As I talked with Karen, I realized that the Psyched Up program was, in many ways, a leadership program.

Over time I have mostly shifted away from the Psyched Up model to the Volunteer Plus model because I perceived a lack of support for Psyched Up within my department. For example, when I first proposed the Careers in Psychology class, there was vocal opposition from some of my fellow faculty members, despite the high level of student interest and the fact that I was doing the class as an unpaid overload. At the same time, there were a couple situations where my efforts with Psyched Up were used by the department or the administration to make themselves look good. This did not sit well with me.

However, interestingly, I took on two students under the Psyched Up model this quarter, mostly because they came to me desperate to earn a couple upper division credits. They were both former students of mine who had done well in my class, and I decided that I would be able to come up with useful projects for them to work on. One of them has been working on updating the on-line resources offered on the Psyched Up web page, and the other has, ironically enough, been helping me to do research on re-envisioning the Volunteer Plus program. This has reminded me of one of the things I really liked about the Psyched Up model: Rather than me working on my own to set up structures and systems that produce the benefits I would like to see, I can work with students to do that, like I did with the Careers in Psychology class.

Plan for the Future

As the year comes to a close, I have developed a new plan for how I would like to move forward with community engagement. I came into the year focused on the short-term recommendation of the 2013

report, namely, creating more opportunities for community engagement for undergraduate students in psychology. I have now come to the conclusion that, for me personally at least, I can't continue working on the short-term recommendation without addressing the long-term recommendation, which is to change the institutional incentive structure so that faculty are rewarded for doing community engagement work.

I used to think that the failure to make a serious commitment to community engagement across the institution simply reflected a particular choice of priorities, and that I was just unfortunate to find myself at an institution whose priorities did not always align well with my own. However, as I have seen the institution slowly but steadily move to confront privilege and oppression, I believe this commitment has shifted from optional to essential. We cannot and will not be successful in our efforts to achieve diversity and inclusion if what that means to us is that members of marginalized groups are welcome to come to our campus, so long as they learn how to think and act like a privileged white elite. It will only work if we are actually open to listening to the values and priorities of other groups of people, and if we allow those values and priorities to help shape our mission. This is what community engagement is all about – understanding the needs of different groups of people in our community, and working in partnership with them to address those needs.

Students have been quite effective over the past year in raising concerns and shaping the direction of the conversation, and next year I would like to use the Psyched Up program as a way to facilitate and reinforce some of those efforts. In particular, I would like to partner with Leadership Studies to develop a cohort of student activists, but drawing on the particular skill set of psychology students – their research skills, their ability to find and evaluate academic literature relevant to the issues, their ability to make a compelling case for a particular position. Over the course of a year, I would seek to enhance that skill set with an understanding of institutional structures and the policy-making process. Ultimately, I would like these students to start to influence decision-making within our department, and establish the idea that shared governance means that all stakeholders get input, starting with students, but ultimately working toward the larger community as well.