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Learning by Engaging Communities in Research

Kyun Soo Kim

The experiences I share here with JCES readers will show how my graduate program at The University of Alabama prepared me for a career in higher education, and how it influenced my current thinking about that career.

Given that learning to be a good educator is a lifelong process that does not end at any one point, I have had a rare opportunity to become a well-prepared educator by participating in several community-based scholarship projects as a research assistant in the Center for Community-Based Partnership under the auspices of the Division of Community Affairs.

The role of CCBP as a facilitator of engagement scholarship – a new and rapidly evolving theory-based approach – is to connect student/faculty and community partners in research-based projects designed to solve chronic problems identified by communities. The center creates university/community teams to expand the classroom for students and faculty while addressing quality of life issues locally, nationally, and internationally.

Two projects that were initiated and/or funded in part by CCBP – the Multicultural Journalism Workshop (MJW) and Bama Preparing Alabama Students for Success (BAMA-PASS) – receive special attention here because they directly influenced how I am now designing my courses as a young scholar in my first academic post.

BAMA-PASS helps local schools meet Adequate Yearly Progress standards, fosters demo-

cratic dispositions, improves initiative, and builds academic and civic competence. I supervised and advised undergraduate tutors who held tutorial sessions about social studies topics twice a week for one semester at John Essex High School, a K-12 school in Marengo County in the heart of Alabama's Black Belt, one of the nation's poorest regions.

In stark contrast with attitudes expressed in initial interactions between the tutors and the high school students, the students by the end of the program voiced significantly higher interest in going to college. Over the course of the semester both the tutors and I developed a deep understanding of the need for education in a poor community. It became clear to us that the at-risk students did not reject college because of a lack of ambition but because of a lack of opportunity, incentives, and preparation. These mutually beneficial outcomes for students and tutors were exactly in line with CCBP's goals for the project.

MJW is a project led by the UA journalism department with CCBP's financial assistance and support. It was conceived as a means of introducing both talented and average high school students to the ins and outs of a career in journalism through an intensive 10-day workshop on The University of Alabama campus.

Each year a team of faculty and college students join with visiting professionals to lead high school students in assignments that help them learn what it takes to succeed in a competitive

field – skills of reporting, writing, editing, designing, and presenting news in print, on air, and online.

The effects over 25 years of these workshops are impressive for both university recruiting and adding minorities to the journalism profession. About one-third of those who attend the workshop enroll at The University of Alabama, 85% attend college somewhere, more than 50 percent major in journalism or a related discipline, and the majority of these eventually enter the journalism profession. High school media advisers throughout the nation recommend the students and funding for the program is by media and media professional partners.

These examples show how communities partner with higher education to benefit the younger generation and their schools. More importantly, from the standpoint of my personal development, these examples dovetail with what I want to accomplish as a communication scholar.

Fortunately, my teaching career has just begun at Grambling State, a historically black university. In the middle of handling new tasks, I keep in mind that community engagement must be a part of my teaching philosophy because I have directly experienced the insight that engagement scholarship provides students as well as the young scholar. I am obliged to translate what I learned at UA for the Grambling community.

Finally, in my graduate studies at Alabama, I became a fan of Kurt Lewin, who argued that there is nothing so practical as a good theory. I believe that research contributes to theory de-

velopment, and that theory is eventually for the betterment of our society. It is at the step of conducting research about the projects I participated in at Alabama where I/we fell short. Sound familiar? I admit that my “engaged” experiences fell short of an important component of engagement scholarship because we failed to systematically assess, evaluate, and write up the results in a theory-based manner, though my mentor at CCBP, Dr. Ed Mullins, and a colleague of his in journalism are in the process of systematically assessing the effects of 25 years of targeting groups for a head start in journalism education in partnership with the Dow Jones Newspaper Fund and high school journalism teachers.

Research informs future adjustments in curricular-related activities. Furthermore, it translates the experience of one community into mutually beneficial insights for all relevant parties.

The need for adjustment calls for continuing research activities. Accordingly, a crucial task is to evaluate each engagement project and make the findings available through published research. By doing so, community engagement scholarship will support theoretical advancements in our fields. Without this vital step our efforts will be little more than trial and error.

About the Author

Kyun Soo Kim, a graduate student member of the committee that developed JCES, is teaching mass communication at Grambling State University. A native of South Korea, his Ph.D. is from The University of Alabama. He can be reached at kyun4zzing@gmail.com.