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STUDENT VOICES

Research Socialization: One of the Major Benefits of the 2012 International Engagement Conference

Kirsten J. Barnes

Abstract

As a professional conference that brought hundreds of scholars at various levels, community partners, and students together in common purpose, NOSC 2012 proved to be an unusually rich experience for this University of Alabama graduate student. It provided a greater understanding of the field of engaged scholarship, as well as many opportunities for networking and clarifying career goals.

Introduction

Attending the 13th Annual National Outreach Scholarship Conference (NOSC) in October 2012 was exciting and educationally rewarding. As a graduate student attending the conference, I was given the opportunity to do what the literature says is especially important for graduate students: Becoming socialized into the graduate-research experience through association with experienced scholars. Not only was this an opportunity to network with other professional researchers, graduate students, and community advocates from around the country, it also helped students gain a greater understanding of the meaning and depth of engaged scholarship.

Knight (2002) writes that attending professional meetings will extend students' experiences beyond the classroom and that graduate advisors should encourage students to stay on after sessions to seek out presenters to ask questions in informal sessions. This was just what I, along with scores of other students, did during NOSC 2012.

More than 20 years ago, I decided to become a journalist based on the belief that accurate

information improves quality of life, opening up opportunities that would otherwise be missed. Therefore, the chance to attend a scholarly conference dedicated to the practice of active research that combines university resources and knowledge with community resources and practical experience in an effort to achieve sustainable solutions to community problems interested me professionally, personally, and socially.

Conference Impressions

What impressed me most was the number of students presenters—one group with actual presenters as young as 7 years old! I also found especially interesting the “grow your own” emphasis I saw during the Emerging Engagement Scholars pre-conference workshop.

This workshop, held annually as part of NOSC (now Engagement Scholarship Consortium or ESC), brings about 20 graduate students and junior faculty members together from all over the world for an intensive workshop on all aspects of the scholarly life in which they are mentored by experienced scholars. The young scholars also attend regular conference sessions as part of their program. Emerging Engagement Scholars are accepted in an application process that includes a paper about their research interests. They come from all kinds of institutions, not just ESC member institutions, and their research involves a wide variety of subject areas.

As a writer for the Center for Community-Based Partnerships (CCBP) at The University of Alabama, I had the opportunity to personally interview several of these students regarding

their research, as well as others whose research was presented during the conference. The young scholars told how the opportunity to participate and conduct research and to mingle with veteran researchers in informal settings helped them to understand the value of their education.

After graduation, emerging scholar Jackie Brodsky (2012) seeks the benefits of working with a community agency and incorporating the agency's goals into her work. Brodsky is at the dissertation stage of her doctoral studies in the School of Library and Information Studies at Alabama. Her research deals with age-related disabilities and the difficulties those disabilities create in a world where information increasingly is accessed through technology. "Just hearing about the research process from someone who has been through it will be helpful," she said. "I know that whoever they put me with will have experience in engaged scholarship as a principal investigator." She said she looked forward to working with an experienced researcher and the opportunity to have feedback throughout the year as she continues research for her dissertation. Brodsky and other program participants were exposed to information concerning community-engaged scholarship through background literature reviews, facilitated discussions, and presentations from both national leaders in their fields of expertise and from community partners. In addition they worked with mentors during the conference and afterward.

Another Emerging Scholar, Christel Beverly, a sports and exercise psychology doctoral student at Michigan State University, was surprised by the encouragement for engaged research that she found when she attended NOSC:

It was a safer environment where engaged scholars could be comfortable and find encouragement, which was different from what I experienced at conferences which prioritize quantitative work over qualitative work. The people there were all on the same page where engaged scholarship is concerned. I like the more equalized dynamic between the researcher and the community members.

Beverly's research interests are specifically related to K-12 education in urban regions, with emphasis on how sports leadership impacts the entire school population. As a former high school athletic director, Beverly, who holds an undergraduate degree in sociology and African

American Studies from Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, said engaged scholarship works well with her hands-on approach as a practitioner. "A couple of presentations were very helpful and they got me thinking more critically about my own work and interacting with more people," she said, adding that she was glad to see the support for this type of research taking on national prominence.

"I don't just want to do research and publish papers that nobody is going to read. I want to create tangible research that is presented in a manner that the average person can understand and use," Beverly said. "I think everybody should be required to attend a conference like this. Traditional research is disengaged and removed from emotion. Rewiring universities and think-tanks to move in a different direction when they've done it a certain way for so long will be hard, but not impossible." As an educator who is heavily invested in her community and its future, Beverly hopes engagement research is the way of the future.

"The community partner has just as much to teach me as I have to offer them," she said. "That just takes a bit of humility on the part of the researcher and sometimes that is difficult."

Opportunity to Present

But it was not only in the pre-conference workshop that students were evident. They were given dozens of opportunities to present original research during the main conference. Overall there were 57 student-led presentations from many disciplinary groups. Most of these students were doctoral researchers, but many were master's level students like myself; there were even a few undergraduates. Elliot Knight, at the time a doctoral student at UA but who got his start as a researcher while still an undergraduate, presented his research "100 Lenses: How Arts-Based Youth Partnerships Transform Students' Lives." Today, let it be known, Mr. Knight, a recent graduate, is gainfully employed! He is the Visual Arts Program Manager at the Alabama State Council on the Arts in Montgomery, Alabama. Like me, during his time as a graduate student at the University, he was a graduate assistant in the Center for Community-Based Partnerships.

Knight said:

The research has given me a much better understanding of the processes and contexts that lead to students feeling more creative and confident. I have

seen students, at the junior high, high school, and college levels, become more engaged in their communities and take on leadership roles in their schools and communities because of the visual skills—especially photography and videography—that the program teaches. This research allowed me to conceptualize, design, and implement future programs and creative learning environments that meet students' creative, leadership, and educational goals (2012).

Although UA has taken a huge step forward by incorporating and encouraging student participation at professional conferences, it is not the only university that recognizes the educational value of students' getting this kind of experience early in their career. Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon, has a student-led program that incorporates undergraduates in research and presentation with faculty (Fritzman, 2008). The program encourages faculty-student collaboration, serving to integrate research and teaching and advancing the culture of scholarship at Lewis & Clark.

Like Lewis & Clark, Southern Illinois University in Edwardsville also has launched an undergraduate program to encourage student presentations. Students are required to present their work at the annual SIUE Undergraduate Research Symposium (Pawlow & Retzlaff, 2012). Follow-up research showed that six of seven students who applied to graduate school were accepted and three of four students who did not apply for graduate school had already found jobs in their discipline area. Thus, the more involved students were in research, the more likely they were to achieve their goals after graduation.

One reason The University of Alabama had so many student presenters at NOSC 2012 may be because of a program that gives undergraduates experience in making conference presentations. The Undergraduate Research & Creative Activity Conference held on the UA campus is a premier annual event that provides undergraduates an opportunity to highlight their research or creative activity. In addition to bringing attention to the excellent work of students, the conference allows students to gain experience presenting, to compete for cash prizes, and to form relationships with their faculty mentors and fellow conference presenters (<http://osp.ua.edu/UndergradResearch.html>).

Conclusion

Through experiences like NOSC 2012, and I near completion of my master's thesis, I am more and more able to see the value of conducting research that translates into experience and transferable skills—while at the same time providing a service in keeping with our motto at CCBP, “Engaging Communities and Changing Lives.”

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About the Author

Kirsten J. Barnes is a practicing journalist who has worked with several daily newspapers in Alabama, Georgia, and Ohio. She currently is publisher of a regional newsmagazine *The Black Belt Connection* and supervises a student newspaper at Alabama State University in Montgomery, while working on her master's in journalism at The University of Alabama. She has plans to study for her doctorate upon completion of her master's.