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PROFILE INTERVIEW WITH FACULTY MENTOR JENNIFER BAY

Rachel Rapkin, College of Liberal Arts

INTRODUCTION

Jennifer Bay is an associate professor in the Department of English. Over the past five years, Bay has integrated service-learning into all of her courses at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Bay is the only professor within the Professional Writing Program who consistently uses this teaching methodology. She, however, prefers to call her work community engagement.

“For some people, service has a pejorative connotation,” Bay said. “I like using the term ‘community engagement,’ because you can engage with the community without serving it. There should be a reciprocal nature and the term service doesn’t always capture that as well as it should.”

COMMUNITY PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS

When Bay became a Service-Learning Faculty Fellow, she redesigned English 203, a research methods course for professional writing majors, as a service-learning course. This initiative sparked a relationship with Food Finders. Food Finders plays a major role fighting hunger in the 16 counties it serves. Working with this group has allowed Bay and her students to take their learning beyond Purdue.

“For the first project we did with Food Finders,” continued Bay, “we distributed an oral survey to pantry staff. Our students went to pantries in all 16 counties and did interviews at the food pantries.”

Bay feels it is important to travel and engage with community agencies in other counties outside Tippecanoe and hopes to gather enough resources to allow students in her classes to work with other organizations throughout the state.

“As a land grant university, Purdue has a commitment to serve the citizens of Indiana and I think we’d do well to not just think about the citizens in Tippecanoe County, but actually go out further,” she said. “Digital technology allows us to reach out to other counties.”

Bay also has worked with other local agencies, including Area IV Agency on Aging, West Lafayette Parks and Recreation, and the Tippecanoe County Historical Association. One of the ways she has established service-learning partnerships is through first placing interns at the sites.

“A lot of the relationships I’ve developed with not-for-profit agencies had come from placing interns with them,” Bay said. “The agencies see the skills of our English and professional writing students, and they know the kind of work they can do. Students, in turn, learn how to apply and adapt their skills in a not-for-profit setting.”

As a mother of three and a full-time associate professor, she also finds time to volunteer with the Tippecanoe County Historical Association for at least two hours a week. She helps train other volunteers in archival and preservation methods. Bay will teach a new Honors course in the fall of 2016 called “Archives and

the Digital Humanities,” which will be grounded in service-learning and work with the Tippecanoe County Historical Association.

GRADUATE STUDENT TRAINING

Bay has spent a lot of time preparing graduate students to engage with communities. One of her most popular courses, offered only to graduate students, is English 680, “Experiential Learning and Engagement Theory,” which will be offered for the third time this fall. The focus behind this class is to ground students in experiential learning methodology and to prepare them to teach service-learning at Purdue. Bay uses a reflection method to discuss “out of the classroom experiences” in-depth.

“Most practitioners, in order to be able to grow, learn, and advance, need to be able to reflect on what they do and why they do it, so they can be conscious of their choices,” she said. “When they encounter new situations, they can adapt their new knowledge and apply it.”

The course teaches the theory and background in which service-learning, internships, or community engagement work. Bay said it is also a requirement for graduate students who want to teach the accelerated undergraduate composition course, ENGL 108, which

is designed around service-learning and community engagement.

“All the sections work with a community partner, or they have students who go out into the community and do work and think about public life, public discourse, and the issues facing communities today,” she noted.

CONCLUSION

Service-learning teaches students how to apply their skills in a specific context and carefully reflect upon their experiences. Bay enjoys teaching these courses because she learns something new with each class.

“One thing I’ve learned is how much students crave meaningful work in their courses,” she said. “They get excited that they are doing something in the real world, that they are helping someone, that their writing makes a difference, and that their writing impacts someone and can change lives.”

She always looks forward to the end of the year graduation reception when parents come up to her and say, “You’re the professor who did the project with the food pantry,” or “You’re the one who worked with the older people. My child told me about how much they loved that and how much they got out of that experience.”

Bay described this experience as one of her best moments as a teacher.

“Students talk about these experiences with their parents, family, and friends because they are so meaningful. The experience makes an impact on them and their education,” she said. “That’s why I teach with service-learning. Students are able to apply the theories that they learned in class and get a more meaningful experience out of the course.”

Dr. Jennifer Bay at the Tippecanoe County Historical Association.

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