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# A LumberJack Sunflower, Blooming from Undergraduate Research

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**Abstract**

It was one year ago in spring 2017 when I did not understand how to write research, let alone be confident in it. In the fall 2016 semester, I was part of a class project that worked to provide donations to families affected by flooding in Louisiana. In the following spring 2017 semester, I worked to present my own findings and practice from that project towards a research paper. From that paper I earned the opportunity to be part of an Undergraduate Research Conference. In the timespan of one year from that conference to spring 2018, I worked harder in research and presentations. Going further in research provided me many opportunities to grow professionally. The university I am attending seeks to transform its students with research and learning experiences. This paper seeks to speak about how research and learned experiences as envisioned by the author's university can turn students into better versions of themselves, by providing examples of learned experiences from the author as an undergraduate student.

## Introduction

Engaging undergraduate students in research and research-related activities can increase confidence, skills, and self-esteem (Russell, Hancock, & McCullough, 2007).  For students who did not envision obtaining a Ph.D upon entering college, practicing undergraduate research can change their minds (Russell, Hancock, & McCullough, 2007).  A student enrolled in university transformed his perspective on his own academic future through an undergraduate project and research practices.  His university strives to transform their students through learning experiences, and the work this student has accomplished is reflective of his university's ambitions (Stephen F. Austin State University Concept Paper, 2018).  Collaborating with faculty, working in research, serving the community, and experiencing diversity are aspects of his university's transformative concept (Stephen F. Austin State University Concept Paper, 2018). The words in this paper discuss one student's experiences of those aspects.

## #brfloodsfa Project, fall 2016

In the fall semester of 2016, students enrolled into an introductory social work class at SFA took the responsibility of engaging themselves in an advocacy project facilitated by their professor.  The project's mission was to provide donated goods to families affected by the flooding that occurred during August 2016 in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.  For these students who were learning how to be future social workers, their energy spent in the project was a way for them to experience community-level work and to advocate for individuals and families from a location other than their own.  These students were also able to practice what they were learning from their textbooks and lectures.  Donation boxes were placed across the university campus, along with fliers advertising the project, its purpose, and items that were of critical need.

Donation boxes were placed in 11 locations across campus, including the school of social work, the campus center, administration buildings, and the library.

These locations and documents relevant to the project were stored in one student's online cloud, and were made accessible via #brfloodsfa on social media.  Additionally, a QR code was created that, when scanned using a smartphone, provided a direct link to the project information located in the cloud.  These resources, along with active sharing of the social media links and the QR code allowed news of the project to be spread over 195 times in 3 countries.  The document can be accessed at https://goo.gl/7W6QcA.

 Once collected, the donations were then transported to the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.  The YWCA of Greater Baton Rouge, LA is a not for profit organization whose mission is to eliminate racism, empower women, and promote peace, justice, and dignity for all (YWCA Greater Baton Rouge, 2018).  The YWCA was chosen as the recipient of this project due to its status as a non-profit organization, its mission and values, and because of the relationship established between their social worker and the professor of record in the class.  The donations provided were sorted and dispersed to the flood-affected families and children, and included food, clothing, and toys.  The value of the contributions in time and material bore a value of over $1,900, with an economic impact for the organization of almost $10k, as the YWCA receives a 4:1 match on all donations collected.

The #brfloodsfa project was completed in the timespan of one semester.  This project was an opportunity for students to engage in the activities outside of the classroom that were relevant to the educational deliverables of the SOWK210 course.  This project was conceived as a way to show students the impact of coordinated advocacy efforts by those with the means for the benefit of those without.  The following is the story of the impact that this project had on one student,

and how this opportunity was the beginning of meaningful changes in the way he understood

himself as a person and as a student, and was the catalyst for unexpected growth regarding

research, presentations, and future professional development.

**URC and Community College Psychology Conference, Spring 2017**

The Undergraduate Research Conference (URC) is a competitive opportunity for students

to present research on topics in which they are interested.  Understanding his work with qr codes

and technology in the previous #brfloodsfa project, the student involved was recommended by

one of his colleagues to submit a research paper writing about technology aiding disaster relief in

a social work context.  After the fall 2016 semester and during the break before the upcoming

spring 2017 semester, the student met with his faculty sponsor (the professor who supervised his

work in the #brfoodsfa project) many times a week to re-edit his research paper until it was ready

to submit to his university's URC blind review committee.

Initially, the student did not think that he could come up with a research paper that would

be good enough to submit.  The idea of writing for something other than a class grade was new

to him, and previous recollections of failure gave him anxiety.  The paper he submitted involved

research on how technology has been used to aid natural disasters, and the student wrote about

his own involvement in the social work #brfloodsfa project (Hurt, 2017).  Once the paper was

completed and submitted, looking back the student did not know that he could work so hard.

In March 2017 the student was selected to represent the School of Social Work at the

URC based upon his submission.  Being selected was difficult for the student to believe because

the experience was new.  He had never earned something like that: to actually be recognized as a

beginning scholar.  Before transferring to university, this student had a history of failing

academically.  After presenting at the URC, the student was able to present his work and

research for a conference at his community college in April 2017.

**Impact Lufkin and BPD Work, summer 2017**

During the presentation about his work on the #brfloodsfa project at the URC, a social

worker reached out to him for an opportunity to be part of a community-level research team

titled Impact Lufkin.  The social worker observed his work with qr codes, cloud computing and

technology, and wanted to include that perspective towards their community research.  In

summer and fall 2017, the undergraduate student and social worker collaborated on a business

card that contained a QR code linking to the project's appreciative inquiry report.  The qr code

for this project was similar to the one for the #brfloodsfa project, but the code in this business

card was linked to a folder containing more than one PDF document whereas the code in the

#brfloodsfa project linked to just one document.  Once the business card was finalized and

printed, it was handed out to community members involved in the project.  These business card

allowed the Impact Lufkin report to be accessed over 250 times in 4 countries.  The report can be

accessed at http://bit.ly/impactlufkin.  A project celebration for Impact Lufkin was announced

towards the completion of the research project, and at that celebration the undergraduate student

involved was mentioned by the social worker who recruited him.

Soon after the student's involvement with the research project was completed, he aspired

to work on a proposal for an upcoming social work conference: The Baccalaureate Program and

Directors' (BPD) 2018 Conference.  The student met with his mentor, the professor who

supervised his work on the #brfloodsfa project and 2017 URC, to work together on a proposal

about technology being implemented in community-level social work practice.  The student and

professor sought to present a workshop at the conference about how to specifically create and

use QR codes to link accessible information for mobile device users.  Work on that proposal was

completed in the summer of 2017.  During fall 2017 the student and professor received word

from BPD on their submission status: they were not selected to present at the 2017 conference.

### #sfaharvey, KTRE News, NASW-TX, and Lumber Jack's Ball, fall 2017

In response to the historic and catastrophic disaster of Hurricane Harvey, the students and

faculty at the SFASU School of Social Work engaged in an advocacy and educational pursuit to

engage those affected by the storm.  Students enrolled in the senior-level class were tasked with

compiling resources relevant to the unmet needs of hurricane survivors on diverse topics

impacting the community of Houston including housing, food, insurance, pet needs, veteran

resources, and more.  The document seeking to help those affected by Hurricane Harvey can be

accessed at http://bit.ly/sfaharvey, and the link has been clicked more than 50 times in two

countries.

Students submitted comprehensive lists of resources germane to each topic, which were

then compiled and stored in a web-based cloud.  This was designed and implemented very

similarly to what occurred in the #brfloodsfa campaign.  The website link to the document and

the QR code was shared through social media such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter with the

hashtag #sfaharvey.

The #sfaharvey project was a third opportunity for the undergraduate student to

incorporate his technological skill of QR codes and cloud computing in social work practice.  A

local news reporter from KTRE News involved the undergraduate student and members of his

School of Social Work in news coverage about the technology used to help others (McCollum,

2017).  The student spoke about his involvement with #brfloodsfa, #sfaharvey, and Impact

Lufkin, while another student spoke about their experiences with the project (McCollum, 2017).

After the news coverage, the student wrote a proposal to present his QR code practice to a state-level conference for social workers: The National Association of Social Workers Texas Chapter (NASW-TX). He used the research methods learned from the URC paper to craft his abstract for this conference; writing about incorporating technology in social work is one of the Twelve Grand Challenges of Social Work (AASWSW, 2015). The student traveled to Galveston to present a poster about QR codes and undergraduate-level advocacy to social workers. That experience helped him learn more about how he fit in the world of social work and speaking about his research/practice helped him be able to speak about all of his work in a more professional manner.

Because the #brfloodsfa project that occurred in fall 2016 was a great experience for the student and professor involved, they wanted to create a new project for the fall 2017 semester. Their idea was the Lumber Jack's Ball: a community celebration that sought to shed light on LGBTQ+ identities and expressions, particularly the art form of drag. This ball was designed to be a relaxing event for individuals to have fun and learn more about those who perform in drag. The money received from the ball was going to be donated to a cause that assists the LGBTQ+ community. Over some time, the professor and student crafted a proposal to be submitted to their School of Social Work for clearance to go forward with the Lumber Jack's Ball. Other students were involved in the project, and many university organizations/clubs were informed in order to garner support for the ball. Unfortunately, the project was not able to move forward because the LGBTQ+ student-lead organization on campus was unwilling to offer support. The work performed by the student helped him understand the beginning process of organizing a community event.

**Diversity Conference, Teaching Note and Future, spring 2018**

Currently in spring 2018 the student had the opportunity to present a lecture at an annual Diversity Conference presented by the Office of Multicultural Affairs at his university.  His lecture spoke about diversity in music, using multilingual lyrics in songs as examples.  The student is also working on a teaching note with his mentor, writing about how engaging an undergraduate student in work outside of the classroom changed him from how he was in high school to now.  This particular teaching note is important to him because it is a chance for him to be published in a scholarly journal before he graduates with his BSW.  That chance is something he has been dreaming about since he was in community college.  In the upcoming months of March and April, the student is working on involving himself in more opportunities.  In March 2018 the student gets to present work about QR codes and technology in social work practice at a scholarly forum at Louisiana State University in Shreveport, Louisiana.  The student and professor involved in the teaching note are working towards presenting their work at a community college psychology conference in April 2018.  In the future the student seeks to enhance his future in academia.

### University's Vision, the Student's Perspective

One of the goals of my university is to assist students in ways to transform their own learning experiences (SFA Concept Paper, 2018).  A concept paper from my university addresses this goal and highlights specific points to transform students: Common Intellectual Experiences, Collaborative Assignments and Projects, Undergraduate Research, Diversity/Global Learning, and Service Learning.  For the student involved, his work with faculty and university from the past year is able to reflect those points.

My work ethic towards the 2016 #brfloodsfa project was intellectual, collaborative, and part of service learning.  The intellectual part was my application of technology (cloud

computing and qr codes) towards the social work and advocacy relating to the project.

Technology applied towards the profession of social work is needed and can be implemented

more (Dunlop & Fawcett, 2018). Technology is a standard of the NASW (NASW, ASWB,

CSWE, & CSWA, 2018) and one of the twelve Grand Challenges of Social Work (AASWSW,

2015). I collaborated with my professor and other classmates when we were dropping off the

donation boxes across campus and picking them up. The service learning was my understanding

of how to work towards a community of parents and children in Louisiana that needed help after

a disaster, and the benefits I felt from being a positive part of their lives.

Working through the 2017 URC was a difficult moment in my life. I did not have a

paper already written, and I had to create a topic to research. Meeting with my mentor every

week before the due date was highly stressful and worrisome. In the end though all of that work

paid off in more ways than one. I earned the opportunity of getting to present a poster and

represent my School of Social Work. I got better in my writing from that experience, and as a

university student I implemented common intellectual experiences, collaboration with my

professor, undergraduate research, and service learning. The intellectual aspect of the 2017 URC

was how I critically thought to apply technology in community social work practice towards both

my research paper and the previous #brfloodsfa project, which is what my paper was based on

(Hurt, 2017). The collaborative effort was with my mentor, who was willing to meet with me

and assist my understanding of how to write a proposal and conduct research.  Undergraduate

research existed from the paper I wrote, pulling literature from diverse journals and discovering

interesting articles about technology in disaster relief (Hurt, 2017). The service learning of the

2017 URC was when I presented the poster, spreading the knowledge of qr codes and

rehabilitation social work to individuals who viewed my poster and listened to what I had to say.

The topic of qr codes was something new to talk about and the audience at the poster

presentations were able to learn of a new way to incorporate them into projects.  For one social

worker in particular, my presentation of qr codes was beneficial enough for them to recruit my

knowledge in this work towards a macro-level project: Impact Lufkin.

My energy spent in Impact Lufkin was an entirely new experience.  I did not expect to be

involved in such an important community-level project.  A running theme for my time in school

is how I was able to connect technology and social work in the #brfloodsfa project.  All of the

work after that is connected.  Creating qr codes for social work purposes was new at my own

School of Social Work, and that skill was an integral part of the opportunities I have taken.  The

basis of technology and social work coming together was a common intellectual experience for

Impact Lufkin, especially collaborating with the social worker that recruited me at the 2017

URC.  I did not apply to be a part of Impact Lufkin, rather the social worker asked me to use my

understanding of technology towards Impact Lufkin.  I earned a scholarship from that work, and

the scholarship afforded the Chromebook I have used to type these words.  The most

encouraging part from my time at Impact Lufkin was how the qr code business card that I

created with the social worker was distributed towards the community members.  That in itself

was serving the Lufkin community that I live in.

The #sfaharvey project, where students and I worked to help those affected by Hurricane

Harvey in 2017, offers reflections of the concept paper my university hopes for its students.  We

collaborated to help diverse aspects of populations who were trying to recover from the disaster.

The service part lived online, in that all of the resources from the document are available from

the sharing of the website link, hashtag, and qr code.  Again, the common intellectual experience

was utilizing computers, technology, and social media for disaster relief social work.

Earning the opportunity to present my work to a greater audience in Galveston, Texas at the NASW-TX 2017 Conference was surreal. Speaking to current social workers was intimidating but at the same time optimistic. In those moments I learned hands-on about my profession and was received well by everyone. Presenting a poster at NASW-TX incorporated the intellectual experience of qr code technology in social work, the collaboration of my mentor supporting me in my proposal submission, the undergraduate research that took part of my proposal and poster, and the service learning of speaking to many social workers by myself for the advocacy of the #brfloodsfa project. One person I spoke to said that they live in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. They shook my hand and thanked me for my work in providing donations to their area. When I was in Galveston, far away from my university, I felt like I could do anything as a student and as a social worker because I worked hard to bring myself to that city.

When I was on television speaking about social work and technology, it was both stressful and fun. I did not expect to be on a news segment during my time at university. When I spoke to the news reporter about qr codes and technology in social work, providing that information to them was a method of sharing the common intellectual experiences of advocacy and news broadcasting. Collaborating with the news reporter helped both the technology information and Impact Lufkin gain more coverage. I engaged in undergraduate research for the news when I wrote a pitch to the reporter, in hopes of being greenlighted for the story. The written pitch was edited before being submitted to the reporter. Experiencing diversity happened because I did not understand how a news segment was created. A microphone was placed on my shirt and I had to face in front of a camera while talking to the news reporter. That experience helped me better understand how news segments are run, and the service learning was knowing

that I was able to help my surrounding community better understand both social work and qr

codes.

The teaching note that my mentor and I are working on has been a long process.  The

idea behind it is important to me, because I feel that working on literature about student

engagement has the capacity to help future students in their own programs.  Students who,

similar to myself, can thrive in opportunistic endeavors outside of the classroom.  I believe

college professors and faculty need to know that.  The common intellectual experience was my

mentor and I understanding that information of my perspective as a student can be beneficial for

others, and the collaboration is the joined effort of myself and my mentor putting our names

behind this work.  The undergraduate research is going through the process of editing and

framing my lived experience into American Psychological Association (APA) format and

turning my experiences into better versions of an academic argument.

I earned the opportunity to speak about musical and linguistic diversity at a 2018

Diversity Conference hosted by my university.  This particular presentation was based on a

theory I learned from the textbook assigned in the same SOWK210 class that worked on the

#brfloodsfa project: the Global Village Theory by Marshall McLuhan.  This common intellectual

experience was applying the Global Village Theory towards modern languages used in music.

The undergraduate research was finding various musical examples that incorporate different

languages.  I used those songs as examples of the Global Village Theory existing into current

culture, and the musical part of this research exists as an online Spotify playlist at

http://bit.ly/cityglobal.  The best part of service learning in this presentation was understanding

how my presentation helped social workers, who were in the audience, continue their education

and licensing, because engaging social workers in diversity of cultures is a standard from the

NASW (NASW, 2018). Along with that, my presentation was able to offer social workers

continuing education units (CEUs). That particular aspect made me happy and I felt like I was a

part of helping social workers in that I presented something new and useful for them.

## Conclusion

All of the work mentioned previously was centered on one student. He was lucky to be

enrolled into the fall 2016 SOWK210 class that changed his life with the #brfloodsfa project.

His growth and self-perception was made possible by three things: the research he engaged in for

the 2017 URC, himself, and his mentor. Giving students opportunities to engage in research

outside of the classroom, like the Undergraduate Research Conference, gives them ways to

change their academic lives for the positive. For future students similar to myself, students who

do not know if they can belong in academia, the life-changing chance of engaging in

undergraduate research has the capacity to help them see themselves differently and for the

better. Undergraduate research has the capacity because I see myself differently now because of

it. I give thanks to everyone involved in my blossoming growth.

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I see this paper as a culminating moment of the time spent at my university and at what I proudly call my own School of Social Work. There are many important people who have helped me get to this point, and it would not feel right to forget to mention them with words. The most prominent people that have supported me have been my mentors and colleagues. Megan, you were the very first person to tell me that I have the ability to write something for the 2017 Undergraduate Research Conference. I did not 100% believe you at the time, and I am so thankful that you helped me discover this strength within myself. It was you and Dr. Morris who gave me the strength to continue in all of this work. Dr. Morris, you have been there with me when we were editing my first URC submission week after week in 2017. All of the time you have taken out of your life to work with me, it means so much. I did not understand why in the beginning, and your steadfast efforts in helping me has changed the way I see myself and my abilities. Thank you, and thank you to my other social work professors who have pushed me: Mr. Johnson, Mrs. Johnson, Mrs. Scott, Ms. Moss, Dr. Cooper, Dr. Wilder, Dr. Copeland, and Dr. Avant. And to Ms. Carol, you have helped me out immensely every time I stepped into our School of Social Work. Thank you.

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