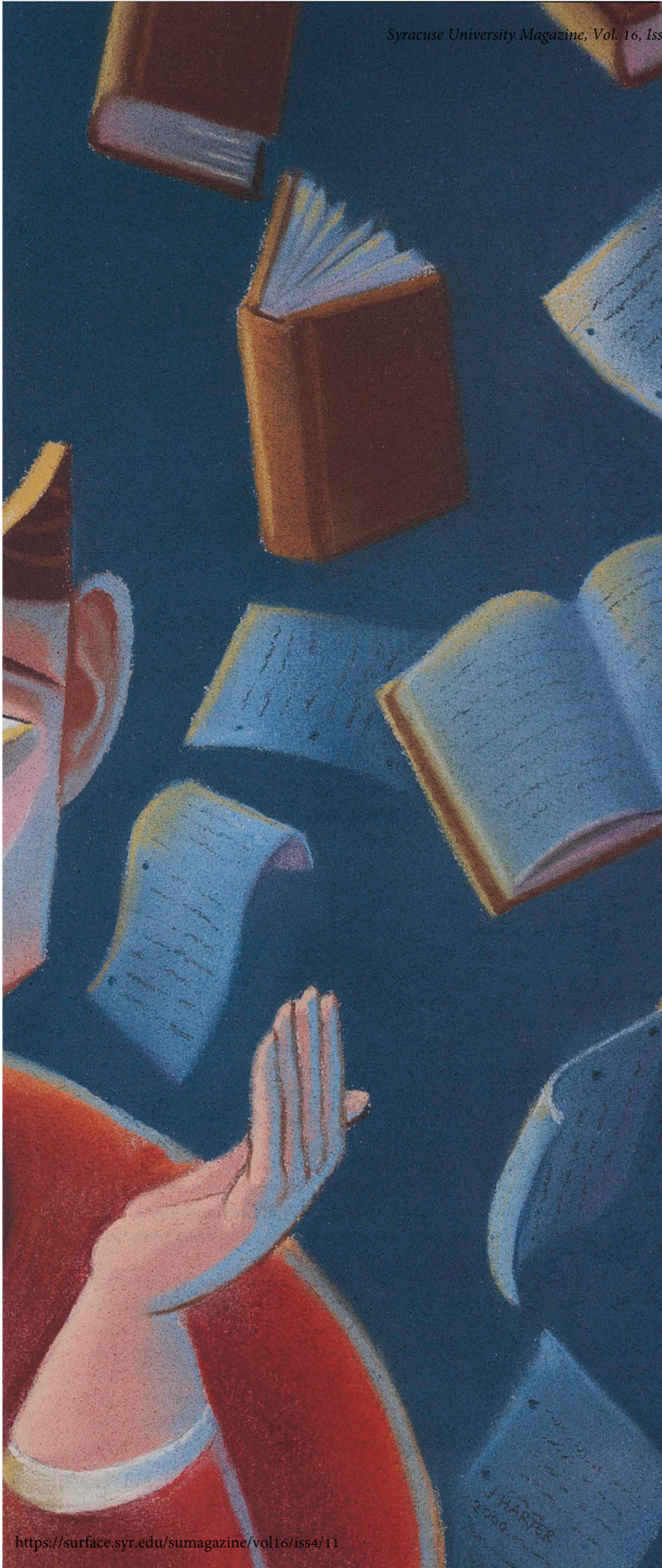


Sparking Innovative Learning

By Susan L. Feightner



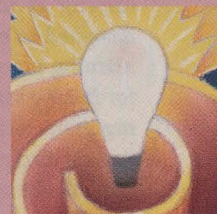
The University's

Vision Fund

Encourages Creative

Experimentation

to Enhance Education



Illustrations by Jeff Harter

“I believe

you can't understand life until you study the relationships between the experiences of individual people and the larger social events of their time. ”

—SARI KNOPP BIKLEN

School of Education professor Sari Knopp Biklen teaches students about discrimination and diversity issues in education by exposing them to the voices of people from underrepresented groups. Biklen, a Meredith Professor of Teaching Excellence who chairs the Cultural Foundations of Education Program, believes such perspectives are important to helping students truly understand the historical impact of these issues. And while textbooks, lectures, and term papers are useful, she is convinced that the most effective way to present the topic is through the journals, diaries, and other personal writings of those who struggled with discrimination firsthand.

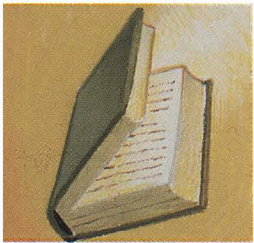
Biklen knew such materials were buried in archives across the country, and she was determined to find them. She envisioned sending students on a personal fact-finding journey—a scavenger hunt of sorts—to discover voices from the past that could drive home the lessons of discrimination and its effect on education.

But the project would take money—to travel to archives, copy documents and store information on CDs, and disseminate the findings to fellow department faculty. So Biklen developed a project proposal titled “Private Documents on Public Issues: Acquisition of Curriculum Resources for Educational Diversity.” She submitted the proposal to the Syracuse University Vision Fund, a three-year, \$1 million initiative established in 1998 to support visionary, experimental, and creative ideas leading to the improvement of teaching and learning. Biklen’s project was one of 21 selected as a 1999 University Vision Fund award recipient. “The grant was critical in our effort to move forward,” she says. “The endorsement and support of the University beyond the monetary was a great motivator for us as well. It’s gratifying to have colleagues behind you and believe in what you’re doing.”

According to Frank Wilbur, associate vice president for undergraduate studies and executive director of the Center for Support of Teaching and Learning (CSTL), the Vision Fund was designed to encourage creative experimentation and enhance all facets of the teaching and learning process both inside and outside the classroom. CSTL staff members provide support for faculty seeking funding, helping them refine ideas, write proposals, and eventually assisting grant recipients in implementing the projects. “In addition to encouraging collaboration among disciplines, the Vision Fund is intended to link academic and student affairs initiatives more deliberately and evaluate and share what was learned,” Wilbur says.

Last December, 17 projects were awarded grants for 2000, bringing the total number of funded projects to 38. The final cycle begins this fall, although Wilbur hopes the Vision Fund will become a permanent part of the University’s academic environment because it recognizes and supports the creative ideas of faculty and staff. The Office of the Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs established the Vision Fund through the Fund for Academic Initiatives, a three-year trial program created to enhance innovative learning.

A committee of faculty, staff, and students selects Vision Fund recipients based on how effectively their proposals emphasize innovative teaching and learning, diversity, and interdisciplinary approaches. The committee also considers which projects will have an impact on the greatest number of students. The Vision Fund provides two kinds of grants—small grants of up to \$5,000 that support the creative ideas of individual faculty and staff members, primarily at the individual course or small project level; and larger grants of \$10,000 to \$30,000 that target school, college, and department initiatives. “It’s hard not to get excited about the ideas being explored,” Wilbur says. “I’m impressed by the energy, creativity, and commitment of faculty, staff, and students involved in these efforts.”



Tracking Down Injustice

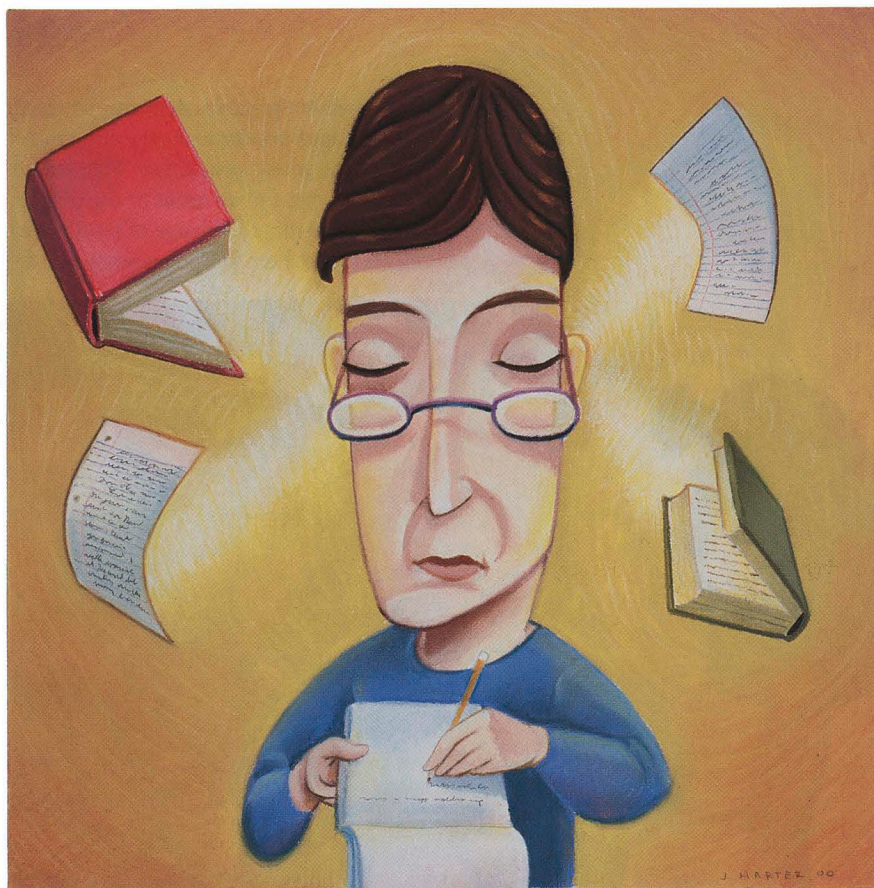
Once funding was in place, Biklen and her graduate students and staff scoured library and museum archives across the country to identify the most engaging and provocative first-person accounts of discrimination in education.

At the Bancroft Library at the University of California at Berkeley, they discovered a woman's journal that shed light on the tragic circumstances faced by Japanese Americans during World War II. The Japanese American woman wrote of horrible, degrading conditions in the concentration camps she and her family were detained in under the executive order of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt. She documented her despair and anger with gripping journal entries that leave the reader more sensitive to how discrimination, the struggle for equality, and diversity issues throughout history have affected not only specific groups, but also individuals within those groups.

While at Duke University in North Carolina, Biklen's students and staff collected material from a project called "Behind the Veil: Documenting African American Life in the Jim Crow South." Amid the material was a 1994 interview from a black teacher, now in her 80s, and her husband, a former principal of an African American school. The couple described life in Wilcox County, Alabama, and the difficulties they encountered. "In the first place, we didn't get any money for supplies, teaching aids, and things like that. It was a matter of unlocking it and giving you the keys, there's the school," the husband said in the interview. "You had to find your money. The state of Alabama gave you permission to collect a fee from the students, but they didn't collect it and you couldn't force a student to pay it."

The group's final fact-finding mission will be a trip to the Hampton Institute in Virginia to collect first-person accounts of Native American experiences. "We'll review material on the Carlisle School, a major United States Indian boarding school," Biklen says. "We're interested in accounts, for example, of the haircutting that the Native American students had to undergo to look more European. We'll also look at other strategies the school used to Europeanize its students."

The original documents from their research are being scanned into a computer and burned onto CDs, and will eventually supplement curricula in nine courses. "The project has been exciting and stimulating for both students and faculty," Biklen says. "I believe you can't understand life until you study the relationships between the experiences of individual people and the larger social events of their time."



Linking Community Service and Research

Another Vision Fund project allowed the Department of Sociology to establish its Research and Innovative Learning Center. "The idea was to provide better research and experiential opportunities for students, especially undergraduates, by linking them with local community organizations and projects," says Professor Gary Spencer, chair of the sociology department. "These organizations often are in dire need of more legs and hands. By pitching in, the students enhanced their practical skills and empirical knowledge while directly benefiting Syracuse communities."

The project began unofficially in January 1999 with Syracuse in the 20th Century, a special topics seminar for sociology majors taught by Professor Arthur Paris, the project leader. Presentations by guest speakers included an overview of significant political and economic

“By pitching in, the students enhanced their practical skills and empirical knowledge while directly benefiting Syracuse communities.” —GARY SPENCER

issues for greater Syracuse; an examination of the local labor market and current trends; and a report on refugee populations relocating to Central New York and the cultural adjustments and problems their young people face. Following these presentations, students selected topics and investigated social service areas in the community where they could do fieldwork. “This course broadened students’ knowledge of local issues and raised questions for further research,” Paris says. “It also gave them field experience, and deepened their understanding of how such research

tools as qualitative and quantitative methods can be used in the real world.”

Jennifer Nolan '00, a sociology major studying through University College, designed an informal questionnaire for the female inmate population at a local prison, visited five on-site prison parent/child programs, and interviewed female inmates at two correctional facilities. Her research confirmed the critical reality of sexism in the criminal justice system and the need for programs to support families during women’s incarceration.

Glenda Alvarado '00, a College of Arts and Science sociology major interested in maternal health, conducted interviews with area midwives and analyzed the historical impact of the medical treatment of childbirth on midwifery. Her research showed that consumer demand for natural childbirth has contributed to an increased demand for midwives.

Twenty-five juniors and seniors in the sociology class Prejudice and Discrimination worked with 25 urban Syracuse clergy to install donated computers and provide tutoring on using e-mail and the Internet. In exchange, the clergy introduced the students to issues, strengths, and problems in Syracuse’s inner city.

Stephanie Slater '00, a newspaper major in the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications with a sociology minor, taught a local minister how to use a computer to write sermons and perform other tasks. In return, he shared with her stories of the discrimination and prejudice he had encountered throughout the 50-plus years of his life in Syracuse. In one story, he recalled the first time he went into a Syracuse bar. After he finished his drink, the bartender took the glass from him and intentionally broke it. “It didn’t feel good,” the minister told Slater. “Nothing was said. The white man next to me said they do that when all black people come here. It hurt.”

The minister also pointed out that discrimination in Syracuse was not as overt as it was in the Deep South. In 1967, for example, police pulled him over while he was on a date with a light-skinned black woman in his new car. They told him they were suspicious of a black man driving a new car and thought he was with a white woman. Although he hadn’t committed any traffic violations, he was ticketed for speeding. “You can feel discrimination when you know



what it is and you've felt it before," he told Slater. "It feels like you're nobody, like people hate you for no reason. But you have to get over it, or it will hinder you from happiness in life."

Such a learning exchange was the ultimate goal of the Research and Innovative Learning Center project. Thanks to Vision Fund support, the center demonstrated its value as a catalyst for student-centered learning. The center has since attracted funding from other sources, allowing its work to continue. "The results have been very positive for students, faculty, social service groups, and community representatives in the Syracuse area, as well as the clients they serve," Spencer says. "Everybody wins."

Simulating Tangible Solutions

Creative experimentation in teaching methods was the concept behind the Vision Fund project of Alan Levy and Hiroshi Higuchi, professors of mechanical, aerospace, and manufacturing engineering in the L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science. They believed there was a fundamental flaw in the way SU's mechanics-based engineering students were taught engineering science. With a typical course containing anywhere from 40 to 120 students in a large lecture format with 3 hours per week of lecture and 55 minutes of recitation, the professors found a significant portion of the class "intellectually absent" from discussion, participation, or involvement of almost any kind. The non-stimulating environment also may have been the reason why so many students were physically absent from class.

Higuchi and Levy decided to change the way these students were taught by developing and integrating a virtual laboratory into mechanics-based engineering curricula. The idea was to create interactive computer simulations that would put engineering problems and physical processes on a web site (www.mame.syr.edu/simmech/) or CD-ROM, allowing students to interactively explore associated phenomena. "We proposed to replace the traditional recitation with an enriching, structured experience," Levy says. "We felt students needed to see a connection to something tangible, and this was a way to do it. Ultimately, students will meet in a simulation laboratory and, under the guidance of an instructor, explore the physical meaning of problems and processes through virtual experiments. The lab component is intended to run parallel with the lecture."

The professors began by building a "virtual machine shop" complete with computers, software, and printers, and staffed by graduate and undergraduate students, dedicated to designing web sites and developing interactive simulations for instructional use. The students produced simulation/visualization applications, either on the web or on CD-ROMs, and integrated them into select courses. "We envisioned the facility functioning like a machine shop, taking requests from faculty for large and small projects that ultimately are put on the web or CDs," Levy says.

The shop will also produce specially designed simulations for high school and middle school students in the Syracuse City School District based on ideas provided by their teachers. Levy says an extension of this project requires external funds currently being sought from NASA and the National Science Foundation to develop a fully operational simulation design shop and course.

Eric Hagopian '00, a mechanical engineering major, joined the project in its infancy and used it as his honors thesis. "As a program writer, I was exposed to new computing languages and made creative use of the Internet," he says. "Learning is becoming more and more independent and Internet-related. Having this kind of project complements the student demand for learning. I now have a better idea of what programming entails."



Writing for the Community

College of Visual and Performing Arts student Mohamed Jalloh '01 believes students are guests in the communities in which they live and learn, and have a duty to participate in service projects to maintain and improve those communities. The speech communication major didn't always feel this way. The call to community service inspired him only after he'd enrolled in Writing Studio 1 as a freshman and Writing Studio 2 as a sophomore. Both courses were taught with a service-learning component, based on the idea that writing skills would improve if students were engaged in critical thinking through community involvement.

The concept was expanded more broadly when a proposal titled "Linking Experiential Learning to Writing: A Service-Learning Cluster in the Writing Program Curriculum" was selected as a 1999 Vision Fund award recipient. The funding allowed faculty, including Eileen Schell and Margaret Himley from the College of Arts and Sciences, and Pam Heintz, director of the Center for Public and Community Service, to develop a cluster of service-learning courses in the Writing Program. "We wanted to offer students the opportunity to write not just about the community, but also with and for the community," says James Ineich, the Writing Program's service learning facilitator. The grant gave the program's service-learning group the opportunity to develop links between experiential learning and writing; support inter- and cross-disciplinary teaching excellence; and contribute to writing scholarship, curriculum design, and innovative teaching practice. "The students puzzle through cultural issues, class issues, discrimination issues," Ineich says. "They are motivated to write by what they have experienced in their service-learning projects."

Jalloh took part in a one-on-one tutoring program for his first project and volunteered at the local Boys & Girls Club for his second. At the club, he spent three hours twice a week participating in arts and crafts with the kids, baking brownies, and even taking the kids to an SU football game. "We had fun," says Jalloh, whose experiences inspired his writing. "Every day I left that place I felt I had accomplished something good. I can only hope that somehow something I said or did touched one kid."

When service learning was incorporated into the Writing Program, it generated immediate instructor interest. The number of service-learning offerings in the Writing Program jumped from 3 to 19 sections in just three years. In addition, the Vision Fund grant allowed the Writing Program to build a web site (wrt.syr.edu) that describes service-learning writing courses, introduces faculty and syllabi, and presents student narratives about service and examples of their work. "The web project itself was a service," Ineich says, noting the site was created by undergraduates in instructor Maureen Fitzsimmons's upper-division service-learning writing course. "Some classes read books and then wrote about what the books said a community was," Jalloh says. "Our class actually went out and experienced a community. That made class much more interesting."

Providing such interesting, creative, and innovative ways to teach and learn is integral to the Vision Fund initiative. And by sharing this knowledge with the campus community, the Vision Fund generates the creative energy and enthusiasm for research and learning on campus that it set out to. "The success of the Vision Fund has definitely exceeded our expectations," Wilbur says.

Providing such interesting, creative, and innovative ways to teach and learn is integral to the Vision Fund initiative. And by sharing this knowledge with the campus community, the Vision Fund generates the creative energy and enthusiasm for research and learning on campus that it set out to. "The success of the Vision Fund has definitely exceeded our expectations," Wilbur says.



Vision Fund 2000 Award Recipients

Development of a Living Learning Community and Faculty Mentor Model,
Office of Residence Life, Terra Peckskamp

The Creation of New Theme Housing Options in the Residence Halls,
Office of Residence Life, Adrea Jaehnig, Eric Nestor, Terra Peckskamp

Innovative Information Practices: Prototype Project—Innovations in Health Informatics Database, Eileen Lantier, College of Nursing; Jana Bradley, School of Information Studies.
See related story, page 14.

Preparation of Two New Training Program Curricula and Materials, Including Videos, and Conducting an Evaluation Test, John Murray and Anna Husen, Program on the Analysis and Resolution of Conflicts, Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs

Urban Mapping Research Initiative, Mark Linder and Anne Munly, School of Architecture; Don Mitchell and Anne Mosher, Department of Geography, College of Arts and Sciences/Maxwell School

Urban Education: Working with Families of Children with Disabilities, Tracy Knight, School of Education

ERacism: A University/Public School Collaboration, Mara Sapon-Shevin, School of Education; Carrie Smith, School of Social Work; Bonnie White, Title IX facilitator.
See related story, page 15.

A Closer Look at a Small-Town Community, Mark Dolan and Sherri Taylor, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications. See related story, page 14.

Early Intervention for Children's Reading Problems, Benita Blachman, School of Education

Weekly Self-Assessment: Making Students Responsible, Jerry Evensky, Department of Economics, College of Arts and Sciences/Maxwell School

Distance Learning and Inter-University Collaboration in Advanced Graduate Courses, Donald Marolf, Department of Physics, College of Arts and Sciences

Meeting Cross-Curricular Goals Through Writing with/in the Community, Eileen Schell, Writing Program; Margaret Himley, Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences

Experiential Learning of Steel Design and Construction, Eric Lui, L.C. Smith College of Engineering and Computer Science

Improving Conceptual Understanding in Introductory Physics Through Research-Based Curriculum and Enhanced Training of Teaching Assistants, Christian Kautz, Department of Physics, College of Arts and Sciences

Development of a Course to Enhance Dialogue Between Undergraduate Students and International Teaching Assistants, Derina Samuel, Teaching Assistant Program, Graduate School; Margo Sampson, Department of Languages, Literatures, and Linguistics, College of Arts and Sciences

Building Bridges and Blurring Boundaries: Re-Envisioning Graduate Education as an Integrated, Interdisciplinary Learning Community Experience, Cathy Engstrom and Vince Tinto, School of Education

S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications Proposed Student-Run Public Relations Firm, Pattijean Hooper, Newhouse School

