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Profile Interview with Dr. Jeralyn Faris

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PROFILE INTERVIEW WITH DR. JERALYN FARIS

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Diyuan Deng (*Public Relations and Strategic Communication*)

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCH

Mengshu Cai and **Diyuan Deng** are seniors in communication at Purdue University. They spent three semesters researching students' reflections of their service-learning experiences in small group communication classes. In April 2019, they attended the DePauw University Undergraduate Honors Conference to advance their research papers. Both students have been accepted to Northwestern University in different master's degree programs. Mengshu plans to pursue a career in marketing communications and Diyuang plans to start her own business in public relations and influencer marketing. In this article, they uncover the teaching journey of Dr. Faris as well as her takeaways in the process.

FACULTY BIO SKETCH

Dr. Jeralyn Faris has been a continuing lecturer in the Brian Lamb School of Communication for eight years, but her Purdue community connections have been lifelong. Her father, Bill Long, owned a drugstore on the west side of campus, and she grew up working there. As a state representative, he was, as she puts it, "a true statesman who served others and taught me to do the same." She earned a BA in communication at Purdue in 1972, and subsequently she and her husband spent years rearing a large family in Carroll County. Her love of teaching was applied to homeschooling and volunteering as educator and 4-H leader. In 1996 she began volunteering with the Tippecanoe County Jail chaplain's team and continues in that role. Concerned with the statistical increase of incarcerated women and the recidivism rate, she returned to Purdue to pursue her MA in communication (2006) and PhD in communication and criminal justice (2011) to earn credentials and become a more effective advocate for incarcerated women.

Faris's dissertation was a 4-year qualitative study of the Tippecanoe County Problem Solving Reentry Court. Dr. Faris explains:

I took a criminal justice course taught by Dr. JoAnn Miller, who was committed to using her knowledge to better the community. She designed the Reentry Court and invited me to serve with her on the team that supported ex-prisoners, men and women, returning

to the community after years of incarceration. The team met with and advised the judge, attending weekly court sessions with ex-prisoners. The court provided support and accountability, and I participated for over four years, assisting a total of 98 men and women in their navigation of reentry challenges—housing, employment, addiction temptations, family reunification, and a myriad of other issues. It was an amazing experience.

Dr. Faris became entrenched in her commitment to community engagement and service-learning models because she experienced the impact of learning as she supported and advocated for the ex-prisoners in the court system.

MAKING COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS TO FOSTER CIVIC AWARENESS

Faris's participatory research with incarcerated people "never became boring and was intensely satisfying," and she immediately applied a service-learning component as a graduate student instructor. She instructed students about the work of the Reentry Court in class, and they prepared presentations in groups of five. They wrote grant proposals and received funding from Purdue's Office of Engagement. She partnered with community organizations who willingly provided venues for groups of students to present their final semester projects and raise awareness of the court. The monies provided transportation to meetings of Kiwanis, Breakfast Optimist, and Noon Rotary Club, and residents of Westminster Village. The project benefited students by providing them the real-life experience of giving presentations to community audiences and encouraging local citizens to grow in their sense of civic responsibility. Students and their audiences learned about the Reentry Court's impact

in assisting male and female ex-prisoners and enabling them to become productive community members.

In spring 2016, Dr. Faris began teaching COM 320, Small Group Communication. Though most of the 25 students were seniors, none of them had course-related service-learning experience. They expressed concerns and resistance regarding the service-learning requirement. It was declared to be out of their "comfort zone," but Dr. Faris knew one of the best ways to learn is through real-world situations. She discovered that the Indiana Veterans' Home had just started the Music & Memory program designed to create personalized music playlists on iPods or other devices. People who suffer from Alzheimer's and dementia are able to reconnect with their memories through music (Music & Memory, 2019). The students were an excellent resource to implement the program. Currently, Dr. Faris teaches two COM 320 sections and works with two community partners: Indiana Veterans' Home and Signature Healthcare Lafayette.

In both facilities, low-income residents, many of whom suffer from dementia, have few visits from family or friends. Purdue students help fill that void. A total of 300 Purdue students have participated in this community engagement project and worked with Dr. Faris and the



Figure 1. Students of Faris' Small Group Communication course meet with residents of the Indiana Veterans' Home.



Figure 2. Small Group Communication students join with music providers for Indiana Veterans' Home.

community partners to continue improving ways to serve the residents.

Dr. Faris is one of five faculty members from across the State of Indiana to be named a 2018–2019 Faculty Fellow by Indiana Campus Compact (ICC). This honor involves collaborative research to promote critical service-learning and community engagement course development. The fellowship also requires evidence of active involvement in professional service. Dr. Faris has been a weekly volunteer instructor at the Indiana Women's Prison for a semester-long public speaking class. She hopes to help restore credit-based postsecondary education to this forgotten population as one element of much-needed prison reform.

STUDENT AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

In terms of the COM 114 courses, community awareness of the Reentry Court was raised through 10 student group presentations by a total of 56 students. Audiences ranged from about 25 to over 200 in number. Through the presentations, both students and community members had a deeper understanding of the marginalized ex-prisoners and the difficulties of returning to the community where they committed crimes. Also, students

gained experience writing grant proposals, researching an important civic issue, and developing greater presentation skills by speaking to intergenerational audiences.

Thereafter, Dr. Faris was more assured that giving students real-life experience through service-learning course work would benefit both her students and the community. Therefore, she chose to incorporate service-learning into the Small Group Communication course. She connected her students with staff in two nursing facilities in West Lafayette, Signature Healthcare and Indiana Veterans' Home, by having the students visit the residents every week during one class period. Residents in both facilities were low income or homeless with few people to visit them. Students' weekly conversations have brought much joy to the residents. According to Jolene Brackey (2004), the simple pleasure of having someone listen to their stories fulfills basic needs for many older people. Students learn that they can create moments of joy through the kindness of communication with the residents.

After two semesters, Dr. Faris began collecting qualitative data on students' perceptions of the value of the service-learning experience. She was awarded an ICC Scholarship of Engagement Grant for spring 2018. A



Figure 3. A veteran's emotional response to a student's provision of music that brought back long-forgotten memories.

portion of that grant benefitted both of us, as we were hired that semester as research assistants. We became certified as coinvestigators and were trained in the process of having research approved by Purdue's Institutional Review Board. We typed up and made confidential copies of Dr. Faris's data. In the following semester, she developed an independent study course to teach us qualitative research methods. We interpreted our data by recognizing themes, sorting it into different categories, and creating a coding book based on students' experiences in the facilities (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). By the end of the semester, we each wrote a research article about service learning and communication. Both of our papers were accepted to the DePauw University Undergraduate Honor Conference in April 2019.

Our analysis of the data shows that from students' perspectives, there is a change in their attitudes towards service-learning. The impact can be understood clearly by giving a closer look at a real story from one group of three students in the first section of COM 320 taught by Dr. Faris. The majority of the students were technology majors, taking this required course before graduating at the end of the semester. They expressed their reluctance by stating, "Dr. Faris, we don't do people. We are 'geeks' and this is a little out of our comfort zone." However,



Figure 4. Enlarged view shows more students and residents engaging together at the Veterans' Home.

three weeks later, one student presented his group's first experience with a veteran to the rest of the class. Their attitudes had changed. The vet played a joke on the threesome by asking, "My left leg fell off the wheelchair. Could you put that back up there for me?" As the student searched for the leg under the lap blanket, he realized there was no left leg! The man laughed heartily and said, "I got you, Grant! I got you! I lost that leg in 'Nam [Vietnam]." The student told the story, and the three looked at each other and said, "If he can do that, we can do this!" Attitudes changed because they connected with and cared about a man who had served our country.

REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION

The service-learning pedagogy implemented by Dr. Faris provides students real-world opportunities to apply small group communication theories and increase intergenerational communication skills. Students discover their communication strengths and weaknesses in this process. This teaching design offers a unique social context that directly exposes students to a marginalized social group. Within such a context, students can improve their empathy and sense of social responsibility.

Apart from the positive impact that service learning brings to the community and students, ethical issues remain. Dr. Faris openly discusses ethical questions with students

who tend to see the experience as a "project." She notices residents' sadness after students leave, but residents look forward to the next group of students the following semester. The situation could be worse if the service-learning component fails to continue someday. Therefore, Dr. Faris is considering ways to create a sustainable model, a well-designed course that can be modified and improved by other instructors. She hopes more Purdue instructors will catch the vision for community-engaged courses and continue the work after her.

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