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Placing Undergraduate Researchers in Juvenile Detention Centers

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Bridging the Divide Between Biology Educators and Disciplinary Researchers

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We created a very unusual partnership to foster undergraduates' exposure to research by bridging the divide between the biology education community and researchers in the discipline. A grant from the NSF Research Coordination Network in Undergraduate Biology Education (NSF RCN-UBE) allowed members of CUR and members of the Association for Biology Laboratory Education (ABLE) to work together to assist faculty interested in infusing research experiences into introductory biology laboratory courses. Research-based instruction provides many of the same benefits of traditional mentored-research and expands access to all biology students. A national survey (Spell et al., CBE 2014) about the essential components of an authentic research experience revealed several themes suggesting two conceptions: one emphasizing novel research questions to the exclusion of other themes and a separate conception emphasizing the process of science. The negative correlation between these themes suggested a disconnect between educators and research scientists. This finding inspired workshops for teams made up of a researcher and an educator to develop and implement a module that incorporates the researcher's scientific questions in an introductory biology laboratory course.

The 2015 faculty workshops were held at the ABLE Conference, the Annual Meeting of the Ecological Society of America (ESA), and the American Society for Cell Biology (ASCB) Annual Meeting. Our website (rcn.ableweb.org) lists upcoming workshops at other disciplinary and education conferences. For faculty unable to attend our workshops, the website also lists resources on developing and assessing course-based research opportunities. The responses to our workshops have been excellent, attracting applications from more than thirty diverse institutions, including community colleges, minority-serving institutions, and massive online college systems, in addition to liberal arts colleges and research universities. Participant surveys reveal a diversity of professional identities and suggest that this workshop model successfully supports their collaborations and may help expose a significant number of future introductory biology students to research early in their educations. 

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Placing Undergraduate Researchers in Juvenile Detention Centers


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The importance of getting students out of the lab and into the real world to address complex research questions was the catalyst for this undergraduate research program. It features

a unique partnership begun in 2012 between the Valparaiso University Psychology Department and the Porter County Juvenile Detention Center, located two miles from campus. As part of a longitudinal study examining the relationship between childhood trauma and youths' risk for violence and recidivism, undergraduate students are trained in clinical interviewing and data collection techniques. They also have to deal with complex logistical aspects of satisfying an institutional review board and legal liability considerations, obtaining informed consent and conducting research with one of our most vulnerable and understudied populations, incarcerated youth.

Through this university-community partnership, students have the rare opportunity to gain access to a secure facility and are exposed to at-risk youth and their parents, as well as to correctional staff and institutional culture. In addition, as noted above, students learn clinical interviewing and assessment skills, which are typically reserved for advanced graduate students in psychology and related fields. As a result of this research program, the participating students have had opportunities to present their research at numerous campus, regional, and national conferences, as well as to collaborate with faculty and juvenile detention administrators on written reports, grant proposals, and manuscripts.

One of the primary goals of this community partnership is to use the results of this research to inform and enhance the mental health and risk assessment procedures currently used in the juvenile detention facility, as well as to train detention staff to use methods of interacting with the youth in their care that are sensitive to the trauma individuals have experienced. The student researchers have been an integral part of these ongoing efforts. In addition to the numerous academic and professional benefits of being involved in this type of applied research experience, undergraduates are also exposed to the multifaceted considerations and logistics involved in developing a research partnership with a correctional facility. Finally, students gain familiarity with the additional research ethics, mandatory reporting, and consent procedures required with vulnerable populations such as incarcerated minors. 

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Undergraduate Research and NSF's Broader Impacts

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All research proposals submitted to the National Science Foundation are reviewed on their intellectual merit (ability to advance knowledge) and broader impacts (ability to benefit society). NSF suggests nine desired societal outcomes of research it supports including: full participation of women, persons with disabilities, and underrepresented minorities in STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines); improved STEM education and educator de-