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Where's the Wifi?

From the Editor

Dr. Marybeth Lima is the Cliff and Nancy Spanier Alumni Professor at Louisiana State University

One of the best parts of my job as a faculty member is directing the LSU Community Playground Project; we collaborate with communities to design (and sometimes build) playgrounds that reflect the unique aspects of the community that the playground ultimately serves. Last summer, a county extension agent named Robin Landry connected my team to a rural community some 80 miles south of Baton Rouge. Bayou L'Ourse is a census-designated place¹ five feet above sea level with a population of almost 1,800 people. The community has a nice public park, but its playground is dated—the community's park and recreation board (all volunteer) wanted to update the playground, but its members weren't sure how to proceed.

Last June, my team met Amber Cavalier, one of the board members, to tour the park and to get new playground suggestions that Amber had already collected from the community. Amber's husband and children came out to meet us as well—the children provided ancillary entertainment as we took notes and dimensions in the sweltering summer heat. The need for updated equipment was evident as we watched Amber's daughter traverse overhead rungs on a large, faded playhouse; her younger brother was clearly used to being carried, and my team members took turns holding him as we completed our work and conversations. My team was inspired by the pretty location, specific requests, and by the friendly interaction during their visit, and they quickly created a playground design concept for the park.

When I contacted Amber regarding the team's progress, she asked us to present the design concept to the entire park and rec board for approval at their next monthly meeting. In preparation, the team practiced their presentation multiple times, improving content and delivery each time, as "getting it right" is an iterative process, as well as a critical priority for successful partnership. I knew that there were about 10 board members, and I printed out color copies of the presentation slides because I thought that some members would like to have a hard copy in front of them during the presentation.

On August 1, I drove a departmental vehicle with the four members of my team who had worked on this project, two of whom were new to the team, and two veterans. I eased into conversation with my students, the leisurely kind when you know that you have miles to go, and the inspiring kind with people you know are extraordinary. One member shared that she was nervous about public speaking because she had faltered during a previous presentation. All team members, including me, told her their tricks for dealing with nerves and told her that they "had her back."

We arrived on time and walked into the community center located next to the park. We were ushered into a tiny, square room. Board members were packed around the small conference table, and a few members of the public who had come to watch were seated in chairs immediately behind the table and pressed against the perimeter of the room, except for the wall that held the presentation screen. We took the last remaining chairs behind the table while Amber ran to get a couple more, which she somehow squeezed in, so that everyone had a place to sit. We were crowded, but ready.

I began passing out hard copies of the presentation while the students stood up—because there was no room to maneuver, they prepared to present from the back of the room.

"Where's your flash drive?" Robin asked.

"Our presentation is on Google Drive," one of my students answered. He walked over to the computer to log on to Google Drive.

"We don't have WiFi!" Amber supplied with a laugh. "We're supposed to get it soon, but right now, we don't have any."

"No problem," my student replied. "We'll use a hot spot on our phone." I thought to myself, 'great idea,' but alas—we were in such a rural area that the hot spot didn't work either.

I have worked with communities for more than 20 years and I have made my share of erroneous assumptions along the way, enough so that I have illustrative stories for my students on the importance

¹Unincorporated area

of learning your community partner and the ways that assumptions can sometimes corrode the trust in any partnership. In this moment, I realized that I had made an assumption, one that, if I had thought about it, could have been avoided. It wasn't like I had never heard of the lack of Internet access in rural communities—I just wasn't thinking about that—or thinking to ask those kinds of questions.

As I looked around the room, I realized that my inattention to the privilege of living in an urban area wasn't the only thing at play. Amber was still smiling. "This is great," she said. "Stories like this give us more ammunition to speed up our access to WiFi!" But Amber knew us—the rest of the board did not. I could feel their collective wariness. I could see them looking at us, really looking at us. Men clad in construction boots, embroidered work shirts, and ball caps were looking at four women and a man from the big city up north. One of us was wearing a hijab; another was not born in the United States. I thought about my student, the one who shared that she was nervous about presenting—we hadn't even started yet and already things were not going to plan. I worried about her composure.

"We're going to present to you on a phone," one of my team members said confidently, "Y'all follow along on your paper copies."

I didn't have enough hard copies of the presentation slides for everyone in the room, but the community members leaned toward the table and the board members shared their papers, while the students pulled up the presentation on a phone.

The students kicked off their presentation with the kind of confidence that comes from having practiced something so well that you can do it in your sleep. About a minute into the presentation, I felt the tension in the room start to dissipate. Two minutes later, as the team moved into an overview of the new playground design, I felt the sizzle of "lock in," that magical moment when you feel the trust and excitement of the people you're working with.

The students baton passed the phone as they moved through the overview of the design, the elements that they suggested to bring maximum "fun factor" and honor to the community, and the choices for which they needed further board input, which were based on interest and budget. If the student who shared her nervousness of presentation was in fact nervous, it wasn't evident. At all. Every single one of my students nailed that presentation—I treasure the feeling of immense pride I have in my

team almost as much as I treasure the synergy that happens when partnerships blossom—I found myself reveling in both feelings at once.

When the students finished their presentation, there wasn't applause. Instead, there was excited talk amongst the board members. We had been given a budget and we stayed within that budget—but the conversation around the table made clear that the actual amount of funding that the board possessed was three times higher than the number we were given. And the board members were prepared to go far higher than the initial figure.

"We want it. We want all of it. Don't change a thing," one of the board members said, while others nodded and chimed in yes. I made notes on the decisions we had asked the board to make on equipment choices to reflect that they wanted "and" instead of "or" regarding some equipment.

"Can you run us the calculation with that rubber track surface instead of that wood mulch?" We executed that calculation in the room, and the price increase was hefty, but the board seemed to take it in stride.

"So you say you can write us this bid spec with everything you just presented, and then give it to us to move forward from there?"

When I assented, they said, "Okay, then. Prep that spec with the extra equipment and with the rubber stuff."

We left the meeting as the board moved on to other business, but not before each member got up, shook hands with each of us, and said thank you while looking us straight in the eye.

We were jubilant as we got back into the university vehicle—because the park and rec board consisted of volunteers, the meeting was held after work hours—it was 7:00 p.m. and we were hungry. We stopped at a nearby Subway attached to a gas station—other than the two roads that staked out the intersection for the building, the only thing visible for miles in any direction was agricultural fields. Kids had left their bikes unlocked on the curb near the entrance, and the students remarked on how this was impossible to do on campus without having your bike stolen. With food and drink in hand, we continued easy conversation on the way home, including the team congratulating the student who had been nervous. She felt like she had gotten to a better place. Somehow, I felt like I had too.

This experience was one of my favorites of 2019. It reminded me that the human condition isn't about perfection, it's about recovering when

you make a mistake. It's about grace and the ability to keep an open mind when people are different from you—especially when people who are different from you falter. It's about the ability to rally around a common cause, and about the power of teamwork and preparation.

These are some of the themes that echo in this issue of the journal. Many of the articles in this issue focus on the importance of relationships and the critical role of students. In the article entitled “Civic Engagement for the Future Criminal Justice Professional: Serving the Underserved in a Correctional Setting,” Kimberly Collica-Cox details the research and engagement facets of Parenting, Prison and Pups, a program designed to enhance the ethic of care for students who will work with incarcerated women in their future careers, as well as the agency of the women themselves. Our next

article, by Hodge et al., examines the relationship between community engagement and integrated knowledge translation as applied to addressing poverty issues. These authors talk about the key role that relationships play in sustainable partnerships. The remaining articles focus on civic engagement efforts that have positively impacted youth who are members of low-income families; children in the foster care system who are transitioning to college; a community-based participatory research program involving undergraduate student researchers; and Latino children who are deaf or hard of hearing, respectively.

Our Student Voices section includes articles on the importance of understanding and engagement. Finally, please peruse our book review section, in case you would like some thoughtful reading. I wish each of you happy, inspired reading!