A HEALTH CARE PARTNERSHIP REAPS BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS, SYSTEMS AND COMMUNITIES

When the Providence Institute for a Healthier Community launched its trailblazing initiative to help create healthier lives for people in Snohomish County, leaders turned to a trusted collaborator in their own backyard: UW Bothell.

The result was the perfect blend of teaching, learning, research, partnership and impact.

With a goal of truly listening to people in underserved communities to first understand how they envisioned health and wellness and then to design ways to help them realize their vision, the Institute engaged the School of Nursing and Health Studies in a community-based, participatory research project. Another trusted partner, Lutheran Community Services, also played a major role.

Professors Cheryl Cooke, Jody Early and Vicky Breckwich Vásquez jumped at the opportunity to involve their students in the initiative. They conducted person-on-the-street and one-to-one interviews with community members; designed, organized and implemented focus groups in both English and Spanish; observed neighborhoods from their cars in a “windshield survey”; analyzed data;
produced a video; and presented their process and findings at a community health summit.

“It was a humbling experience,” said Charlotte Jordan, who earned a bachelor of science in nursing in June and now teaches nursing at Whatcom Community College. “People spoke to us intimately about their lives, beliefs, families and tragedies they’d come across. I learned so much about the resilience that people have.

“It emphasized the importance of having the community involved in discussions around their health. We can have misconceptions without even knowing it,” she added.

The professors were as excited about the learning opportunities as their students were.

“It was really a work team, not a class project, and it was unlike any class they’d taken,” Vicky said. “UW Bothell’s flexibility allows us to find the best opportunities for students to learn and to use students’ existing skills, grow their strengths and challenge them to learn new skills. We were able to connect to students’ real and true passions.”

Young college students of color, most from underprivileged communities, comprised one focus group. Vicky said it was an eye-opening experience for many of her students.

“UW Bothell students recognized the incredible privilege they have in accessing health care and living in a safe environment. They didn’t realize it would teach them much more than they contributed,” she said.

Jody noted that projects like these have a lasting impact on students after they graduate and as they evolve in their careers.

“We want to educate health leaders and change makers,” she said. “We have a dynamic and ever-changing health care system. It’s important for students to understand all the elements of working with different populations and health care organizations, along with cultural humility, critical thinking and so much more.”

Even though the research is not yet complete, there were already several “ah-ha moments.”

“Snohomish County is very diverse and perspectives and life situations were much different depending where people lived,” Jody explained. “A theme that resonated over and over was a lack of inclusion and cultural understanding which impacts health and health equity.”

For some people, simply living in a safe environment or being able to care for their grandchildren constituted their definition of health and wellness. When asked who they relied on for information on how to stay healthy, people frequently mentioned a strong female figure in their lives. The researchers were also impressed with how resourceful people were in searching out solutions to their health issues.

The professors praised Providence for its forward-thinking approach to listening to the community, self-assessing and sharing what they learn with other institutions. The Institute will use the UW Bothell research to continue and strengthen its work. To learn more about the Institute, go to www.pihcsnohomish.org.

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