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A Dive into Brown University's Past, Current, and Future Community Engagement

To fulfill the research role requirements of the Laidlaw Scholars Fellowship, I completed research this summer with the Brown University Swearer Center for Public Service. The subject of my research was the Swearer Center's historic and modern engagement with the people and city of Providence. Brown as an overarching institution values community engagement and this is shown throughout many departments, but the majority of the work has been focused through the Swearer Center since its founding in 1986. One of the first departments of its kind, Swearer was created by President Howard Swearer and his belief in the importance of civic education. The center works to engage students with the local Providence community and turn theoretical learning from coursework into practice through praxis. It started out as more of a student-run center, but has evolved to host a full staff of both professionals and students which provides grants, resources, funding, support for engaged research/teaching, and much more. Additionally, the center has transitioned from a vocabulary focused around "public service" to the term "community engagement" after realizing that consistent engagement and mutual learning/teaching is more beneficial to all involved parties than one-sided service where students go in once, do extractive work, and then never return to partners. This mission and the physical work of Swearer has evolved over the years, but the center remains committed to increasing diversity and collaboration and fostering mutually beneficial relationships between Brown and Providence.

My research covered how civic engagement has been run in the past, what our community partnerships look like today, how this compares to other similar universities, and finally an analysis concluding how this data may be utilized to make changes to the community engagement program. The end goal of this work is improving Brown's community engagement work and creating partnerships that are more responsive to community needs and better serve the city and people within which the university is ensconced. This project was created and led by Dean Mary Jo Callan and graduate student Aaron Castillo, both of whom I am so grateful to work with and have learned so much from. My work was a small piece of their larger goal of creating an overview and set of suggestions regarding Brown's future in public service, to be given to the university president and possibly distributed amongst community members. It was a pleasure to contribute to this project. The work was simultaneously fun, stressful, and gratifying. I made mistakes over the course of the summer and I am thankful to the multiple mentors at the Swearer Center who aided me and were kind in their corrections and in offering as much help as I needed. I greatly enjoyed this experience and I am looking forward to possibly continuing in this line of work with the Swearer Center throughout the upcoming semester.

I contributed to two different projects over the course of the summer. Project 1, entitled *Salesforce - Validating and Expanding Knowledge of Campus Resources*, focused on analysis and transfer of existing data into a new system. Project 2—*Benchmarking Best Practices in Community Engagement*—was a comparison of Brown's community engagement practices with other similarly positioned universities to see where areas for growth or change may be found.¹ Overall, I learned that data analysis, while seemingly slow and meaningless at times, can actually be widely useful once done correctly and it is important to take the time to work carefully and

¹ The original version of this project included 4 subparts and this project was Project 4. I have renamed it to Project 2 for ease of reading in this paper and for those unfamiliar with the entire set of work.

correctly. Brown should continue to put resources towards the transition into Salesforce, as this will eventually be beneficial to the entire campus, as well as many community partners, once the transfer is complete. This will increase transparency for both Brown faculty and community partners, allowing everyone a greater knowledge of the inner workings of pre-existing and new partnerships and helping to increase overall efficacy. Furthermore, while Brown is doing a lot of positive work in terms of its relationship with Providence, there is still progress to be made and we can look to our peer institutions, particularly Stanford, Northeastern, and Rice universities, to fill these gaps and continue in our goals of constant learning and improvement.

Methods

Project 1 was an analysis of preexisting data. The university recently acquired Salesforce, which is an information platform that creates parent-child relationships and makes it easy to see how different contacts, resources, and projects are interwoven. Employees on the Swearer Center's Community Partnership team are working to consolidate all of the varying info regarding community work and partnerships from across the university into Salesforce so that everything is centrally located and easier to navigate. This will benefit community partners by allowing them to see what projects already exist that may be beneficial to join and benefits the university by preventing multiple projects from working parallel with one another yet never learning of their connection, thus duplicating efforts and missing out on opportunities to share information. Using a Swearer Center-owned spreadsheet entitled "University Opportunities and Institutional Contact Information from Salesforce", my partner Kayla Morrison and I read through approximately 640 lines of data and extracted the names of any projects, events, or partnerships which were missing from Salesforce. This data was initially collected via Google

Form from Brown professors in all departments and the data ranged from 2017 to 2020. Some of the data was lacking detail and some had not been updated in recent years, both of which we noted in a separate document. This was a key part of the work, as identifying missing data will help us to improve and fill in gaps in the future to create a more holistic picture of overall community engagement.

After collecting and listing all of the data missing from Salesforce, we embarked on the task of entering each line into the platform. This included cross-checking to make sure details were correct, determining how each line of data should be categorized (typically either as an institutional resource or a community initiative) and connecting the data to its corresponding professor and academic department. I had never worked on the administrative end of a platform like this, and there was a definite learning curve. By the end, Kayla and I had entered around 100 new data pages into Salesforce, creating a platform for 100 different research projects or community organizations to be represented and described in detail. This work may seem trivial and time-consuming, but the end result will definitely be worth the effort, and I learned that it takes many people and many hours to successfully complete a transition like this. There is still a lot of data to be entered in Salesforce, but our work completed a significant amount of the transfer and contributed to the end goal of representing all of the universities vast array of partnerships in one place. This new shift is partially due to Swearer's recent transition to a department under the President's office (it was previously an independent center). The Swearer Center is now the University's public-facing institution in terms of community engagement, and so it is important to unite data from across all departments and create a unified and organized front. This will hopefully be a vast improvement from the previously disaggregated community work being done by individuals and groups across campus with no hub or centralized focus.

Project 2, which I completed independently, was a compare and contrast between Brown's Swearer Center and the engaged/community focused departments of other similar institutions. I summarized all of this data in a spreadsheet for Dean Callan and other Swearer employees to utilize in their future work. To start, I researched the seven other Ivy-League designated schools, then moved on to the next tier in terms of ranking and prestige. There was no strict guideline as to how I picked schools to research, so I tried to choose a variety from across the country. Overall, I researched 20 other universities. I used various web pages from different institutions to determine where their community work was based, what kind of programs they held for students, faculty, and community partners, what their mission and driving forces are, and what foundations they build their work upon. This varied greatly, with some institutions being structured similarly to Swearer and some having little community engagement at all. At the end, I composed a list of projects or programs done by other institutions that Brown may learn from or use to inspire our own future work. This work was primarily internet-research based, and drew on skills I have gained in past classes when writing research and analysis papers. While less difficult, this project was just as fulfilling and interesting as Project 1, if not more.

Results and Examples

As previously mentioned, my partner Kayla and I successfully entered around 100 new data points into the Salesforce platform by the end of the six-week Laidlaw timeframe. They ranged from faculty research projects, to student clubs, to other institutions both domestic and international who have partnerships with Brown as a whole or with individual employees. This is just a small fraction of the hundreds of organizations and projects with which Brown is involved and which should eventually exist on Salesforce to fulfill the intention of the transition, but it was gratifying to contribute and I learned a lot through my use of the platform.

About three-quarters of the way through, I met with Swearer member Ashley Greene (Assistant Dean of the college and Director of Community Partnerships) to ask a question about Salesforce, and through our conversation we realized that I had entered some of my data points on the wrong pages, thus failing to create the intended connections between profiles, organizations, and projects that Salesforce fosters. Ms. Greene was extremely kind in informing me of the mistake and walked me through the proper steps to fix it and avoid repeating the mistake in the future. This did set me behind, as I had to work backwards and fix much of my past work. However, my research leaders were also understanding and accommodating and I was able to reevaluate my self-set goals in order to reflect what I could realistically accomplish. Now I know to ask more questions before starting a research project, but also to not be scared or embarrassed to admit mistakes. This contributed vastly to my personal learning and helped me to remember that leadership is not about being perfect, rather being open to growth and correction and taking it in stride.

Swearer staff is continuing to work on transitioning data to Salesforce. They are working from preexisting data as well as collecting new information to ensure everything is updated. It will likely take a least a few months before the project is entirely completed, and it will need to be continually updated even once the initial transfer is complete. However, I believe this platform will be of huge benefit to Brown community members as well as partner organizations both in Providence and across the world. It will make Brown's civic engagement more effective and efficient. Once Salesforce is open to the public, pre-existing and new members looking to join or utilize Brown's resources will be able to find them easily and all in one place. They will then have quick access to employee contact information and data regarding the size and timeline of different projects. It will also allow faculty and students to cross-check new project ideas with

pre-existing ones so nothing is accidentally repeated. I hope to continue aiding Swearer with this transition during the next academic year and I am excited to see how the project turns out.

Project 2, the comparison between Brown and other institutions, revealed that universities across the country do not all share the same goals in terms of public service and engagement. Some have entire departments dedicated to the work, like Brown's Swearer Center. Other schools only do community service through philanthropic clubs or student-led efforts, and some barely mention it at all. However, all the schools I looked at have mission statements declaring that they intend to be a force for good in whatever city they're located within, and that they want to foster citizens who are well-informed and eager to help make the world a better place. Different institutions are fulfilling these goals in a myriad of ways. Among the 20 institutions I studied, three had particularly engaging and interesting work which I will detail here.

The three schools I noted with the most engaging data surrounding community work were Stanford University, Northeastern University, and Rice University. They do not all have separate departments dedicated to public service, which surprised me, as I predicted that this would be a predictor of strong performance. All three did share commitments to justice and equity as well as goals of acknowledging their responsibility as powerful players within a historically unequal society. The three also structured their community work differently: Stanford focused mainly on their students and creating engaged coursework; Northeastern focused on community-driven needs and creating space for community to thrive utilizing university resources, and Rice focused the most on addressing systemic injustice and barriers to equity. These are all extremely important goals, and it appears that each of these institutions is making true substantial progress rather than just claiming to be committed to them. Rice is also the only school I looked at that had a large international component to their community service

program—they are partnered with a variety of institutions across the world. About one third of their community partners are international, with another third being scattered across the United States and the remaining third local to Houston. It would be great to see Brown achieve something similar in future years, as this greatly widens their impact and allows them to reach so many more people, as well as creating more fulfilling experiences for the involved students and faculty.

Northeastern publishes a yearly community benefit report which is made widely available to the people of Boston. This prevents the university from operating within a black box and allows community members to be informed and knowledgeable about the resources and partnerships the university offers. Brown definitely holds a place of power above the rest of Providence, and it would be great to start a program like this and make the university's work more accessible to all of Providence's citizens. Stanford has a five year engagement plan laid out on their website detailing their goals and the steps they will take to get there. This keeps the university accountable. Brown is working on something similar, but it has not been made publicly available yet. Drawing inspiration from all three of these institutions, as well as many other schools across the country, will help both the Swearer Center and Brown continue to thrive and be as beneficial to our community, both literal and metaphorical, as possible. All of the institutions I studied are doing something right and they could all learn from one another. An eventual dissemination of this information for the benefit of the greater good is an outcome I would love to see Brown work towards. Alone, each of these rich and powerful schools has a big impact on their surrounding communities, and it would be amazing to see what they could accomplish if they worked together.

Conclusion and Reflection

Overall, I greatly enjoyed participating in this research and I am proud of the outcomes I helped create. If I were to go back and do it all again, I would, of course, work more carefully to avoid making mistakes on my Salesforce data, and ask more clarifying questions before delving into the work on my own. I would also add a few more institutions to Project 2 if I had more time to ensure that I made a fair assessment of the country as a whole. It would be interesting to eventually see this project turn into an international comparison and see how universities in other countries approach community service compared to those in the US. Of course, both of these projects could be expanded to encompass much more data and it is hard to achieve big goals in a period of six weeks, but I still feel accomplished and successful in the work I completed.

I am excited to see how my work eventually factors into Dean Callan's report on the state of Brown's civic engagement for the office of the President and I am glad that I was chosen to work on this project. I learned skills of data analysis, administrative program management and data entry, research, and how to summarize a large amount of data concisely and in an easy-to-understand format. These skills will be useful as I continue through the Laidlaw program and my Brown education as a whole. I am so thankful for the Swearer Center, Grace Argo, and the Laidlaw Foundation for giving me this opportunity and for creating a chapter of such a wonderful fellowship at Brown. I can't wait to continue my Laidlaw journey and see where next summer takes me.

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