

# Partnership Perspectives



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**Editing, Layout and Graphic Design:**

Catherine Immanuel, San Francisco, CA

**Peer Reviewers for This Issue:**

**Alex Allen**, Community Planning and Research, Isles, Inc., Trenton, NJ

**Chuck Conner**, West Virginia Rural Health Education Partnership, Spencer, WV

**Holly Felix**, Fay W. Boozman College of Public Health, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Little Rock, AR

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**Michael Yonas**, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC

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# Table of Contents

- 1** **Walking the Talk: Achieving the Promise of Authentic Partnerships**  
Sarena D. Seifer
- 34** **El Proyecto Bienestar: An Authentic CBPR Partnership in the Yakima Valley**  
Vickie Ybarra and Julie Postma
- 44** **Critical Reflections on Community-Campus Partnerships: Promise and Performance**  
Dana Natale, Kenneth Brook, and Todd Kelshaw
- 54** **Men on the Move: A Partnership to Create Educational and Economic Opportunities**  
Victor Motton, Elizabeth A. Baker, Alfronzo Branch, Freda L. Motton, Teresa Fitzgerald, and Ellen Barnidge
- 62** **Narrating the Journey: Immersion Learning in the Migrant Latino Community**  
Michael F. Bassman and Kendra E. Harris
- 70** **Ethics in Community-University Partnerships Involving Racial Minorities: An Anti-Racism Standpoint in Community-Based Participatory Research**  
Hélène Grégoire and June Ying Yee
- 78** **Sharing Intellectual Authority**  
Semerit Seanhk-Ka and Sara Axtell
- 86** **Community-University Partnerships to Bridge the Non-Profit Digital Divide**  
Carin Armstrong, Kris Becker, Kristin Berg, Thomas S. E. Hilton, Donald Mowry and Christopher Quinlan
- 95** **Community-Academic Partnerships and Institutional Review Board Insights**  
Sarah Beversdorf, Syed M. Ahmed and Barbra Beck
- 105** **Coming Together in the Fight Against HIV: MOMS' Principles of Effective Community Partnerships**  
Susan Davies, Angela Williams, Trudi Horton, Cynthia Rodgers, and Katharine E. Stewart
- 114** **Triple-Layer Chess: An Analogy for Multi-Dimensional Health Policy Partnerships**  
Karen J. Minyard, Tina Anderson-Smith, Marcia Brand, Charles F. Owens, and Frank X. Selgrath
- 125** **Health Promotion in Rural Alaska: Building Partnerships across Distance and Cultures**  
Cécile Lardon, Elaine Drew, Douglas Kernak, Henry Lupie, and Susan Soule

# Narrating the Journey: Immersion Learning in the Migrant Latino Community

Michael F. Bassman and Kendra E. Harris

## Introduction

A successful Academic Service-Learning program must first provide for students the ability to integrate the classroom experience and the application of theory in practice. While it is hoped that students develop a sense of civic engagement and responsibility, they will need, at the same time, to marry learning abstract academic concepts with solving real community needs. Rural Eastern North Carolina offers a rich abundance of opportunities for students to experience immersion learning while addressing community needs through productive partnerships between campus and community. Through such a partnership with East Carolina University (ECU), a dedicated but underserved elementary school and a rural community join forces with a very special group of students and faculty to address literacy and language barriers, health and safety education, and the development of leadership and civic engagement in future health care and education professionals.

*Rural Eastern North Carolina offers a rich abundance of opportunities for students to experience immersion learning while addressing community needs through productive partnerships between campus and community.*

A recent significant influx of immigrant Latino families in Eastern North Carolina, particularly migrant farmworkers, has created great need for educational support, especially in reading and language education for the children and adults of primarily Spanish-speaking families. Additionally, given the significant presence of the university's school of medicine in the community, future medical and education professionals practicing in this region will need to develop a comprehensive cultural understanding of the Latino community and their health, nutrition and safety education needs as well as gain a greater appreciation for diversity in order to best serve this population.

## Program Overview

Such an educational experience is being developed at East Carolina University under the direction of Michael F. Bassman. His work with the Honors Program and the EC Scholars Program at ECU has long supported community engagement and the university's mission of "serve" (to serve), leadership development and undergraduate research. These programs for academically talented undergraduates stress the value of early opportunities for participation in community outreach, the development of leadership skills, engagement in research and the use of Academic Service-Learning as an integrated part of the curriculum, providing a rich foundation for developing partnerships between the community and the campus.

The Honors Program invites academically motivated first-year students who have applied to ECU meeting minimum criteria of 1200 combined Verbal and Math SAT scores or a 26 or better ACT score and an unweighted high school GPA of 3.5 or more. The EC Scholars Program is a comprehensive, four-year educational experience including a competitive, merit-

based academic scholarship. Each year, between twenty five and thirty incoming first-year students are chosen to participate in this program. Within this group, there are four Early Assurance Scholars (and four Alternates) chosen, who, upon completion of the EC Scholars Program with a cumulative GPA of 3.5 or better, are guaranteed admission to the Brody School of Medicine (BSOM). For these students, the MCAT and interview requirements are waived, as well. Typically, at least 90% of students in each class of EC Scholars are in pre-medical or allied health related or education courses of study. In order for EC Scholars to maintain their scholarships, they must successfully complete required coursework and the conditions necessary for graduation with University Honors, which include maintaining a GPA of at least 3.5 and completing an independent Senior Honors Project.



In teaching the EC Scholars in a required first-semester Humanities seminar, Dr. Bassman found them to lack experience with and exposure to rural communities, rural health education and cultural and social diversity, and he found they have had limited opportunities to participate in research and to develop and practice leadership skills outside of extracurricular clubs. Either through experience or bypass credit, these incoming students exclude themselves from critical research and educational opportunities that would better prepare them to serve rural communities and immigrant families in particular. It is crucial that they gain insight as soon as possible into the community, families and health education issues of the Latino migrant farmworkers and put theory into practice by stepping outside the classroom and into the world of their future clients.

The purposes of this ongoing and evolving community engagement instructional program are to 1) foster and develop in emerging healthcare professionals at ECU an understanding and appreciation of community diversity, social engagement and activism and an understanding of the health, nutrition and safety issues faced by Latino families in rural North Carolina, 2) provide literacy tutoring and educational mentoring to first- and second-grade Latino children at an elementary school in rural Eastern North Carolina, and 3), provide health, nutrition and safety education for Latino children and immigrant families through both the tutoring program and through adult English as a Second Language (ESL) classes provided at the elementary school.

The groundwork for this program was begun in Academic Year 2004-2005. During the Fall Semester, EC Scholars were involved in Kindergarten Readiness programs across Pitt County with the intention of serving as mentors and reading tutors. The university students were valued highly by teachers and children alike, but in crowded classrooms they were often ultimately used as teacher assistants and they did not have the opportunity to work individually with the children.

This program model provided us with several important lessons. Notably, it fostered limited community involvement outside the schools. Family and community events held on campus drew none of the invited elementary students and families, despite our sending invitations in

Spanish and English and creating social events featuring food and refreshments. We discovered the need to find familiar, community-centered locations for the social events, such as Belvoir Elementary School. The university, we surmised, represented an intimidating and distant location to families where traffic and parking regulations are complex and campus is unfamiliar territory. Second, assigning university students to schools across the county made it difficult to keep track of them and their progress. Finally, Scholars and elementary students alike would have benefited more from a full-year experience, rather than limiting it to one three-month semester where opportunities for tutor-child bonding were shortened and elementary children faced the second half of their school year with no tutor/mentor.

Using these and other lessons learned in the first year, the program was modified for Academic Year 2005 – 2006 so that the EC Scholars would work only at one school for the full academic year, would incorporate the work into two sequential semester-long courses in their first year and would work only on reading with first- and second- grade students. Through the Pitt County Schools and the work done during the first year of the program, ECU began the partnership with Belvoir Elementary School, an underserved K-5 elementary school in rural Pitt County about twelve miles from the ECU campus. Additionally, the program was modified to include tours of Mt. Olive Pickle Company and Carolina Turkey to familiarize university students with some of the local agricultural industries in this region, and to include a trip to Washington, D.C. to visit the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the National Museum of the American Indian. During this second year of the program, family and community events were held at the elementary school where we experienced strong participation.

University students delved into family life and the challenges children faced outside of school. An ongoing reflective journal of their experiences was one of several key class assignments. The journals are evaluated on students' effort, forthrightness and the energy put into the reflection process. Attitudinal shifts, soul-searching exploration and honest reflection are among the primary goals with journal assignments, which are assessed on a regular basis throughout the semester. The semester culminates in a final project in which groups conduct community assessments in which they evaluate what primary challenges face the community and what resources are currently available and how they are being utilized. They develop recommendations and present their findings to the class and invited guests, including City Councilors. While the community assessments completed by most students in the seminar proved to be disappointing in this past year, it is hoped that the expanded program will generate extended contact with the families of the elementary children, facilitating a more in-depth exploration of the community and more comprehensive research resulting in observations and recommendations of a more proactive nature, such as bringing a chapter of El Pueblo to the region. El Pueblo serves the state of North Carolina as a nonprofit advocacy organization focused on enrichment and strengthening of the Latino community through advocacy, education and legislative action.

*University students delved into family life and the challenges children faced outside of school.*

Since the university tutors bonded easily with their mentees during this second phase of the program, we expect that this will continue to provide a particularly salient link with this

community as the program engages university students with the children and families. This bonding has shown to be effective in reducing in the university students' cultural and ethnic misperceptions, even for those demonstrating racist beliefs prior to their involvement with the project. To further the connections between the university and elementary students, the children come to campus as special guests for a day to tour the library, eat lunch with the university student tutors and participate in a session of Storybook Theater put on by students and faculty from the ECU Theater department. For most of the Belvoir students, it was their first visit to ECU, despite living within close proximity to campus. They received ECU sweatshirts, notebooks and pencils to welcome them and generate a sense of belonging and accessibility to campus. We called them the "Belvoir Scholars" and emphasized that in several years, they could be "EC Scholars" and attend ECU or another university, planting the seed early that attending college was one of several options open to them.

The next phase of this program, to begin in Academic Year 2006 – 2007, seeks to include more intensive reflective work as the university students work individually and in small discussion groups to process their experiences with the Belvoir community. Additionally, nutrition, health and safety education will be included for the children and families through increased accessibility for the mothers to ESL classes and additional reading experience for the children. By combining reading and language tutoring in the elementary school and adult ESL classes with health, nutrition and safety education, several community needs can be addressed while providing a rich educational experience for students training to become future medical professionals and educators.

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### **Project Design and Instructional Methods**

First- and second-year EC Scholars are required to take two courses during their first semester, and one each in their second and third semesters that directly relate to cultural diversity, rural community health issues and the study of current events from a multidisciplinary perspective. All of these courses incorporate Academic Service-Learning and community engagement in their curricula. The Rural Health Literacy Instruction program will span an entire academic year, incorporated as part of the first- and second-semester required courses.

Since at least 90% of incoming EC Scholars at ECU are intending to enter the health or education professions, first-year students in the EC Scholars Program will participate in educational experiences designed to illuminate issues of poverty, immigration and integration, cultural diversity, racism and nutrition, health and safety education in rural communities. In addition, they will be engaged in Academic Service-Learning through providing in- and out-of-classroom tutoring on reading skills with first- and second-grade students identified as primarily Spanish-speaking. Reading materials will focus on nutrition, health and safety and incorporate educational activities created by the university students in fulfillment of course requirements. They will incorporate the health, nutrition and safety education that the children receive at school in order to bring the lessons into the home.

Each year, an EC Scholar will be paired with a First Grade or Second Grade student at Belvoir Elementary School for the duration of the academic year as a reading tutor and educational mentor. University students will also conduct health and safety education through existing ESL classes for adult family members of the immigrant Latino community of this school. Elementary students will use books and materials focused on health, nutrition and safety, and will be given their own books with which to continue to practice reading and learning.

The university student tutors will work with the Spanish-speaking elementary students for two hours per week by tutoring reading in a combination of in-classroom shadowing and one-on-one work away from the classroom. Term projects will involve students in examining and researching community educational needs for health, nutrition and safety and will develop and conduct educational experiences for the elementary children and their families. Scholars will be required to conduct a case study as part of their second-semester follow-up course documenting what each has observed and learned in working with the Belvoir students regarding home life, environment and the effect on health. University student tutors will participate in individual and small group discussion sections focused on reflective processing of their experiences and they will attend workshops on poverty, diversity and prejudice and engage in leadership development activities. They will be required, beginning in the Fall 2007 semester, to take a co-requisite course introducing them to rural health education, also incorporating the Academic Service-Learning element of the curriculum. They will see the housing in the migrant farm workers' community and will learn about the work carried out in the agricultural arena. Additional activities such as interaction events with parents and families will occur at Belvoir Elementary School.

The Belvoir students will be invited to the ECU Campus twice each semester to tour the library and parts of campus, to attend a Story Book Theater presentation and have lunch with the EC Scholars as part of the educational mentoring process and to foster increased academic motivation and accessibility to postsecondary education.

Based on research conducted during the Spring 2006 semester by two graduate exchange students, the ESL classes currently held at the elementary school in the evening will be incorporated into the program. This research indicated a level of frustration felt by mothers of this community. They indicated their desire to learn more English so they could assist their children with homework, increase their involvement with the community and seek employment outside the home. However, their role as primary caregiver for the families' children made it difficult to attend the ESL classes provided, despite the convenience of being located at Belvoir. This research finding provided an opportunity to expand the tutoring program to include the opportunity for interested mothers to attend the ESL classes and bring their children to the school where they would have additional reading time with the university tutors.

Second-year EC Scholar students will serve as project mentors to the first-year students, fostering leadership development, providing guidance and support for first-year students, and providing the opportunity for them to continue their work with the Belvoir Community.

Parallel ongoing research by professors within the ECU Department of Psychology will examine the effects of participation on both Belvoir students and the university tutors and will be incorporated into the evaluation of this program.

After participation in this program, the ECU students in the first year have shown a greater appreciation of the cultural diversity and some of the socioeconomic issues faced in a rural community. Through this partnership with the Belvoir community, these university students are providing valuable tutoring and educational mentoring to the primarily Spanish-speaking elementary school children and through the experience will be better prepared to serve the immigrant families and other clients in rural Eastern North Carolina, either through service in education, the medical professions or social activism. During the second year of the program, the reading test scores of the first- and second-grade elementary students participating in the program will be compared to the scores of their peers who are not participating in the program. First- and second-grade teacher reports indicate their students participating in the program demonstrate an increased interest and engagement in classroom participation at school.

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### **Evaluation Plan**

The program will be evaluated during the 2006-2007 school year to measure its effectiveness in 1) developing diversity awareness and appreciation, leadership skills, a commitment to community engagement, and reducing racism in the EC Scholars, 2) improving reading performance, academic achievement motivation and incorporating the nutrition and safety education received at school into life at home with the family, and 3) increasing the awareness of the parents of immigrant families of the importance of healthy nutrition and safety issues in a rural community.

### **Conclusion**

Many students in the Honors Program and many of the EC Scholars represent ECU's largest and most academically motivated group of potential health care professionals who will serve in the largely rural eastern North Carolina. Therefore, it is critical to begin sensitizing these students as early as possible to the differences in culture and the complexities of healthcare for the population of this region, particularly underserved groups such as migrant Latino farm families. Because of the accelerated progression of academic coursework in the pre-health courses of study, second-, third-, and fourth-year students tend to focus on the specifics of their major-related coursework rather than on the valuable immersion learning opportunities available to them. As a result, it is essential that students take part in educational experiences during their first year in which they will gain understanding and appreciation of the cultural, social and occupational diversity of this community, apply the theory learned in the classroom, and be able to incorporate their learning into future educational experiences. Partnerships with schools such as Belvoir Elementary School can address key educational goals of both university and elementary students and augment innovative programs and curricula while providing valuable community service. Critical elements of this partnership have included the

excellent stewardship of Belvoir Principal Glenn Joyner, the development of relationships with the school community through Reading First Coach Ruth Millar, and the strong support of teachers in the classroom as well as faculty support at ECU. Due in part to Belvoir Elementary School's commitment to this partnership with ECU, the school was recognized for excellence in supplemental education, most recently by being awarded the Bank of America Entrepreneurial Award in May, 2006.

The "Crossing Local Borders Immersion Education Program" is designed to engage both university and elementary students in learning from each other and bridging the differences in language, culture and perspective. It utilizes Academic Service-Learning and community engagement to help each grow in their understanding and appreciation of the other's world and generate an excitement about continuing to explore through education and partnerships between community and campus.

### About the Authors



Michael Bassman completed his graduate studies in Romance philology at Brown University and the University of Connecticut with time off to spend a year in France and later a year in Romania as a Fulbright Scholar. After teaching six years, he decided to return to school to pursue his interest in Yiddish Studies, which, in time, led to the Holocaust. He studied at Yad Vashem Holocaust Institute in Jerusalem and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He later established the Holocaust Studies Program at East Carolina University (ECU).

Since 1998, he has served as Director of the University Honors Program at ECU, developing many comprehensive academic programs and undergraduate research opportunities, including academic service-learning and diversity appreciation. Under his leadership, the Program has grown from 450 to 1,400+ students, garnering administrative and faculty support and increasing visibility. The Office now oversees several fellowships and scholarships, the University Honors, the EC Scholars and the International Student Scholars Programs and the Office of Undergraduate Research.

He recently created the International Student Scholars Program, partnering academically talented International students with ECU Honors students. His leadership experience includes co-founding ECU's Ethnic Studies Program, for which he served as Director for ten years, co-organizing the UNC Consortium on Undergraduate Research, serving by gubernatorial appointment since 1995 on the North Carolina Council on the Holocaust, and election to serve as Councilor for The Council on Undergraduate Research. Dr. Bassman also serves as Assistant Vice Chancellor.



Kendra Harris earned her BA in Psychology from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and her MA in Clinical Psychology from Towson University. She is currently pursuing her EdD in Educational Leadership with a concentration in Higher Education at ECU. Her areas of interest include student cognitive development, curriculum development and organization theory. Utilizing her education and experience in the field of psychology, she began her career in human

resources and management development and training in the corporate sector. She is currently an Academic Program Advisor for the University Honors Program and EC Scholars, serves as Managing Editor of Explorations: The Undergraduate Journal of Research and Creative Activities for the State of North Carolina, and facilitates discussion sections of the EC Scholars Freshman Honors Seminar.

Correspondence should be directed to Michael F. Bassman, Assistant Vice Chancellor & Director, The University Honors Program, EC Scholars, & Undergraduate Research, East Carolina University, Brewster D107, Greenville, NC 27858, or 252-328-6373 or [BASSMANM@ecu.edu](mailto:BASSMANM@ecu.edu).