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Community partnership programs boosted by University investment

BY BEVERLY CLARK

When Emory College junior Kinda Secret signed up for a community psychology course last spring, she wasn't sure what to expect. What she found was a learning experience unlike any other thus far in her education.

Instead of textbooks and a classroom, Secret and her classmates spent much of their time at Carson Prep, an Atlanta Public School in northwest Atlanta. Part of their coursework included running a mentoring program for the middle school girls.

"Anyone can memorize facts and figures in a classroom, but putting that knowledge into action gives you a completely different perspective," Secret said. "I learned more than I expected, and spending time with the girls was good — for all of us. Working in the community was a great experience and I hope more students can have the chance as part of their education."

Now many more likely will.

Emory envisions a $12 million investment over the next five years to enhance the university's engagement with the greater Atlanta community and beyond. A $2 million investment from the strategic plan fund leverages and jump-starts the expansion of activities sponsored by Emory's Office of University-Community Partnerships.

Plans to secure $10 million in gifts and grants over the next five years will make it possible for the OUCP to tap more fully the enormous potential for engaged scholarship and learning at Emory — particularly in its graduate and professional schools — and in the Atlanta community. It is an initiative that cuts across all schools within the University and builds upon the five major themes of Emory's strategic plan.

Since its inception five years ago, OUCP has sent students like Secret, as well as faculty and staff, into Atlanta neighborhoods and beyond to work on myriad community issues, such as gentrification, immigration, education, green space and health. Many projects can now move beyond the pilot phase.

"At the core of our mission is an engagement with our community that infuses and affects all of our scholarship," said Emory law professor Frank Alexander, who is leading a 20-member advisory board of faculty, staff and students that will provide recommendations on the best strategies for advancing engaged learning and scholarship at Emory as it relates to OUCP's strategic initiative.

The board also will help define the future of OUCP, particularly with regard to its role, function and governance structure. The group will report its recommendations to Provost Earl Lewis next spring.

"Historically, the university has sponsored and supported community engagement. However, this strategic commitment is a very strong affirmation that engagement is a necessary component of scholarship and learning for Emory, and we are incomplete without it," said Alexander, who also is the founding director for the Center for the Study of Law and Religion at the Law School. "Community engagement is something we do because it goes to the core of our vision of who we are and who we will be as a university."

In addition to serving the community by providing solutions to real problems, engaged scholarship also has tangible benefits for students, said Michael Rich, founding director of OUCP and associate professor of political science.

"Community engagement allows us to be better teachers and better researchers," he said. "Research shows that students with experiential learning opportunities that get them into the real world have a greater impact on student learning and more lasting results than conventional classroom-only pedagogies. It also helps to generate and foster research projects that go beyond the library, helping our students learn the fundamentals of research while also providing valuable scholarship for the community."

The strategic planning investment comes at a key moment in OUCP's five-year history.

"The funding will shore up successful initiatives that were in danger of fading away due to lack of funding," Rich said. Programs such as SHINE (Students Helping in the Naturalization of Elders), the Emory Community Building Fellowship, and faculty mini-grants will now be able to continue and expand. The Community Partnership Faculty Fellows program — which helps faculty learn about the pedagogy of community-based learning and research — also will be re-established.

Perhaps most significantly, the funding will help fill a critical need for more staff. Rich said he expects that OUCP will hire five to six new staff members, which will nearly double the existing staff and bring Emory closer to being on par with peer institutions.

"The addition of key staff provides the vital support we need to enhance the quality of our engaged scholarship and learning initiatives. With additional staff we will be able to provide a higher level of service to Emory faculty, staff and students and to our community partners that should strengthen the connections between Emory and the greater Atlanta community," Rich said.

"Emory's investment in engaged scholarship and learning should bring greater coherence to Emory's work in the community, yielding both a more visible impact of that work in the community and also stronger connections across the schools and units of the university," Rich said.

A successful centerpiece of OUCP is the Emory Community Building Fellowship, now entering its fifth year and a national model for such programs. The fellowship provides undergraduate students an intensive year of training, research and experience. Results so far include the completion of 17 projects that have produced policy change, new programs and entities, and expanded the capacity of existing community initiatives to effectively address issues such as HIV/AIDS, affordable housing, public education quality, urban sprawl, citizen engagement and more.

The OUCP hopes the infusion of strategic theme funds will enable Emory to expand the fellows program to allow opportunities for graduate and professional students to participate in the program, Rich said.

"Many graduates of the program have gone into the nonprofit sector, and those entering law, medicine and business are reporting they are using their experience to work on community building initiatives within their professions," said Sam Marie Engle, director of the fellows program since its inception.

Several fellows have worked on projects with the Atlanta Housing Authority, one of OUCP's longtime community partners.

"For the past three years, the Emory OUCP team has diligently demonstrated its commitment to community building," said Barney Simms, senior vice president and chief external affairs officer for the Atlanta Housing Authority.

Simms cited, among other accomplishments, the OUCP's work to get a $400,000 HUD grant that directly benefited AHA communities in Northwest Atlanta, as well as the work of Community Building Fellows that has resulted in mentoring programs and the establishment of a Parental Involvement Center at AHA's Hollywood Court community.

"The fellows helped to enhance AHA's capacity to provide much needed resources for families and children," Simms said. "While Emory University and many AHA communities are geographically miles apart from each other, Emory has demonstrated that it cares about the broader community, and delivered a strong message that all kids can learn and achieve.

"This work is also important for Emory students," Simms said. "With changing demographics and a more diverse world, Emory students saw firsthand that low-income families want the same as middle class families — quality housing, a good education and economic development opportunities."

"My lasting hope," said Rich, "is that our students use these opportunities to acquire a distinctive education at Emory that gives them the knowledge and tools needed to foster collaborative, cross-sector initiatives that address important public issues. In the future that expertise is likely to be the essential ingredient that distinguishes leaders who make a difference in their communities."

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