Got Data?

HOW PARTNERSHIPS MAKE IT EASIER FOR DOC STUDENTS TO GET MUCH-NEEDED DATA FOR RESEARCH

STORY BY LORY HOUGH

NE OF THE hallmarks of student research, especially for doctoral students, is having good data to back up findings. But getting your hands on that data, especially when it involves asking — sometimes begging — an already overworked state agency or school district to help out, can be difficult.

Students like Ph.D. candidate KIRSTEN SLUNGAARD MUMMA, ED.M.'15, have seen this up close. “Before I was a graduate student, I worked in the central offices of a charter school network and Chicago Public Schools,” she says. “I understand firsthand the competing demands and political pressure that can come with working in an education agency. Working with researchers isn’t always a priority under these conditions.”

Unless, of course, that researcher has been embedded full time in your organization and you’re now on a first-name basis. This is exactly what happens when students like Slungaard Mumma become fellows through the Partnering in Education Research (PIER) program, housed in the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard University. Through an immersive summer internship, Ph.D. students in the social sciences at Harvard spend 10 weeks in the trenches in a school district or education organization conducting quantitative research as they help the partner find answers to problems they are unable to explore on their own.

“Without a pre-existing relationship, it’s very difficult for students to get access to the kind of data needed to conduct rigorous quantitative research,” says Slungaard Mumma, who interned with the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). “A program like PIER helps build trust between agencies and emerging education researchers, paving the way to meaningful partnerships.”

Ph.D. student MARK CHIN, ED.M.'16, also found it difficult before he was a PIER fellow to get the data he needed for his research, partly because he wasn’t sure where to start. “As a doctoral student, I have had limited experience working with educational agencies on research projects,” he says. “As such, it can be difficult to present a compelling case to states and districts to begin a research partnership, as there are many other researchers and academics in the field with more experience and skills than I have.”

While spending 10 weeks last summer as a PIER fellow working with key data people in the Wake County Public School system in North Carolina, Chin helped the district explore the impact of English learner services on students while building future connections.

“From having worked closely with the partner for nearly a year, I now have a direct connection to the research team at a school district,” he says. “With this personal relationship, I feel as though if, in the future, I had a research project that would make sense to partner with Wake Country, it would be easier to present a compelling case to the district to participate in the project because they know who I am and the type of work I can do.”

Slungaard Mumma is now working on a number of projects that came out of her summer work as a PIER fellow, including a partnership with DESE and Framingham (Massachusetts) Public Schools. The team is examining the civic, economic, and educational outcomes of immigrants in the area who take part in an adult English for speakers of other languages program.

“My summer placement has led to the development of a very meaningful body of work for both myself and my coauthor that is helping us fulfill our dissertation requirements and build our reputations as researchers,” she says, “more importantly, it’s given me the opportunity to learn how to cultivate and fulfill the responsibilities of research partnerships. These experiences have given me more confidence pursuing new research partnerships, and I hope they will make me a much better research partner going forward in my career.”