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UHP Reflective Essay

OSEPI Self-Designed Research Experience

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Ohio Student Education Policy Institute- What, so what, now what?

Part 1: What?

For my self-designed research experience, I was a member of the UC Ohio Student Education Policy Institute (OSEPI). OSEPI started in January with a kick-off event in Columbus, Ohio. At the kick-off event we learned about the Ohio College Access Network (OCAN), what we would be doing during OSEPI, and why what we were doing is important. First, we learned that OCAN supports and created OSEPI as a way for highly motivated college students to voice their opinions on secondary education in Ohio while gaining experience in public policy. We were told that during OSEPI our objective was to develop and create a policy to present to the Ohio Senate Education Committee that benefited the future of secondary education. After meeting The Ohio State University and University of Akron teams, we went back to UC and began brainstorming ideas for our policy and proposal. In the beginning of my personal research and group research, we had discussions about the School-to-Prison Pipeline and how it prohibits students from entering high school and secondary education. After doing intensive research and speaking with educational stakeholders, we realized that while the School-to-Prison Pipeline is a very large and important issue, it was too broad for the purposes of OSEPI.

The UC OSEPI Team and myself began to dig deeper into the causes of the School-to-Prison Pipeline such as suspension and expulsion (having a one hour meeting once a week). While researching the high rates of suspension and expulsion in Ohio (I spent roughly 10 hours a

week on research and group communication), we stumbled upon the term “zero-tolerance policy.” Currently, most Ohio schools use a zero-tolerance policy, and specifically in the Ohio Revised Code, zero-tolerance policy is applied to disruptive, violent, and inappropriate behavior. Our group decided to focus on inappropriate behavior and what kinds of behaviors should be classified as inappropriate. If inappropriate behavior is more clearly defined, instances where students are suspended/expelled for talking out or making “trigger fingers” could be handled differently and more effectively. As a group, we wrote our testimony and one-pager for the Ohio Senate Education Committee and traveled to Columbus for the two day summit. During the first day of the summit, we collaborated with the other colleges, presented our testimony in front of a small group, received feedback, and networked at the Buckeye Grill. We also met lobbyists and politicians who commended us for our efforts as future educators. On the second day of the summit, we met with a special interest group in Columbus as well as the UC legislative liaison, and finally disseminated our work in front of the Ohio Senate Education Committee. I read the testimony to the senators while my group member, Cristina Romero, answered their questions. After our testimony, Senator Lehner personally congratulated our group and we headed back to UC to debrief.

The most significant part of the OSEPI experience was following through with a small part of my dreams. After taking Save Our Schools!, I was really determined to get my voice out about educational change and OSEPI was a great vessel to do so. I have never collaborated with a group as much as I have during OSEPI, and I personally felt like my communication and collaboration skills grew immensely during the duration of our project. Our group worked really well together and we were able to accomplish so much in only three months! Not to mention our group was hands down the most prepared and researched at the summit. I was also surprised how

well respected we were by the University of Akron as well as the OCAN staff and a particular lobbyist we met. While the general reaction was surprise, everyone we came in contact with complimented us on our hard work and intelligence, as well as our friendly and professional demeanor. It made me feel not only strong but satisfied that our peers and mentors were able to see that teachers (even future teachers) are passionate and intelligent about what is going on in our classrooms and we have a say in how we handle policy. I was also very happy that Senator Lehner congratulated us on speaking as future educators and digging into policy.

Overall, I met the majority of my expectations outlined in my proposal. I accomplished my goal of gaining “real world experience in educational policy and voicing my opinion as a future educator,” and “more confidence in doing my own research, and speaking in front of political figures.” I originally thought I would only be spending 100 hours on this experience, however I ended up spending almost 170 hours altogether. In my proposal I was under the impression that we would also be speaking in front of the General Assembly, however we ended up speaking in front of the Ohio Senate Education Committee. As a leader and the primary delegate for the UC OSEPI Team, I was able to display my initiative and independence while still remaining an integral part of the overall group. OSEPI was a wonderful balance of independent research, small group collaboration, and large group communication. Despite the immense amount of research I dedicated to OSEPI, I was able to reflect by using the OSEPI Blog in my learning portfolio and post weekly about what I was doing and going through. My blog helped me by being a checkpoint every week and a quiet place where I could stop and reflect. As for the big dissemination in front of the Ohio Senate Education Committee, it went wonderfully and I would do it again in a heartbeat.

During this experience I was able to accomplish the ability to frame and develop the research project question or problem. As I explained above, our group and myself went through a great deal of critical thinking in order to move our focus from the School-to-Prison Pipeline to zero-tolerance policy in Ohio. The first step of this process was gathering information on the School-to-Prison Pipeline and briefing about it. After we realized our focus was too large, we brainstormed about the various causes of the School-to-Prison Pipeline and which facet we could focus on and develop. By narrowing our focus, we were able to frame the zero-tolerance policy research question and build upon it. After coming back to UC from the OSEPI summit, I was able to think beyond the just completed research and articulate how my worldview has been impacted by the experience. Beyond the research I did about the School-to-Prison Pipeline and zero-tolerance policy, I was able to remove my education glasses and see how fortunate I was to even have the OSEPI experience. I have never experienced democracy head-on, besides voting, and it felt great to voice my justly earned opinions with the men and women who represent education policy in Ohio. By participating in OSEPI, I was able to see how my actions as a citizen have an impact.

Part Two: So What?

During my OSEPI experience, I mainly relied on my knowledge from the course Save Our Schools! Not only was Dr. Stitzlein my advisor for this group, but she also taught Save Our Schools! and was able to remind me of the knowledge I learned in that course during OSEPI. In the course, we focused on how to be an effective agent of change for educational reform. As a member of OSEPI and an individual writing policy for educational change, I needed to use my knowledge about how to be effective agent of change. I remembered our numerous discussions in Save Our Schools! about looking at both sides of an argument about education. Zero-tolerance

policy is a hot button topic, and during research and collaboration our group focused on the pros and cons of zero-tolerance policy. We also asked each other questions that the senators or lobbyists might ask while hearing our proposal and testimony. During Save Our Schools! we also learned about how Republicans and Democrats usually view education and trends they follow. This information was important during OSEPI because the Ohio Senate Education Committee is mostly made up of Republican senators. I learned in Save Our Schools! that Republican members tend to view equality over equity in education which applied directly to our focus on zero-tolerance policy. Overall, Save Our Schools! gave me a plethora of background knowledge to use during OSEPI that was extremely helpful. Another valuable resource I used during my experience was the Webinars provided by OCAN. During Webinars, OCAN presented valuable information about the legislative process and how to address legislators. Without these Webinars, I would not have found the time to research these topics on my own, so they were very insightful and helpful.

One ethical consideration I did not like during OSEPI was the stigma behind our team, particularly. Going into OSEPI, my group immediately recognized that we were the only all female team and the only majors besides political science. For coming years, I hope OSEPI reaches out to more colleges, and particularly invites other education majors to join in. Political science is important in the OSEPI setting, but future teachers are equally important if not more because we are directly impacted by the choices the Ohio Senate Education Committee makes. By inviting a more diverse collection of students, OSEPI will increase their success and accessibility.

Part Three: Now What?

After completing OSEPI, I realized how much it actually impacted my life. I integrated my new knowledge of critical thinking, collaboration, and feedback to fuel my roles as a CECH ambassador and UHP ambassador. These skills will allow me to be a more effective leader and group member by working in groups effectively. During my first few events as a UHP ambassador, I collaborated with other ambassadors to help organize a transition student event. I also use my critical thinking skills when talking to prospective students and their parents about the University Honors Program and answering their questions. As a CECH ambassador, I will use my feedback skills to elicit feedback about the group blog and my job as a secretary. OSEPI also taught me the value of opportunity and how many opportunities I have at UC. If I would not have taken Save Our Schools! in the fall, I would have not been nominated to participate in OSEPI. By displaying my interest in educational change, I have been able to complete two Honors experiences and hopefully many more! I hope to use this opportunity as a learning experience, and to push myself in future classes to seek out opportunities such as OSEPI.

The main portion of my dissemination was the testimony I presented in front of the Ohio Senate Education Committee. The UC OSEPI Team and myself wrote a one-page proposal as well as a testimony, which included all of our research and findings on zero-tolerance policy and inappropriate behavior. The OCAN team as well as OSU and Akron received this information, as well. After the OSPEI summit, I participated in an interview with my teammate Cristina Romero, where we were interviewed about our OSEPI experience by CECH media. These audiences were able to learn about our motives as future educators, but also about why the language of zero-tolerance policy in Ohio needs to be changed so more students can have education opportunities. By sharing my passion and OSPEI testimony with so many colleagues and the audiences I

mentioned, I was able to gain confidence and pride in my knowledge. I love sharing information about education as well as awareness, and I will definitely be participating in opportunities like OSPEI for the rest of my college career. OSEPI allowed me to realize that even the farthest of possibilities are not impossible and I surprised myself during this journey.