Social Innovation at George Brown College

Since 2007, the Government of Canada has granted universities research capacity-building funding through the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). This July, select college-level initiatives got their own slice of that pie, through the Community and College Social Innovation Fund.

Anyinam and his student-researchers have partnered with the National Educational Association of Disabled Students, Nipissing University, and University of Ontario Institute of Technology to provide an online environment for post-secondary students with disabilities.

"Research shows that students with disabilities have a harder time integrating in post-secondary communities," explains Anyinam. To counter this challenge, he and his project partners are working on developing a social media platform that allows disabled students to more easily connect with peers.

The platform also folds in a mentoring program to connect students with disabilities with recent post-secondary graduates who also have disabilities. “We know from research that mentoring makes a huge impact on peoples’ sense of themselves, their connectedness to what they’re doing,” says Anyinam. “Overall our goal is to support those students and help them come out on the other end with credentials and a better sense of themselves.”

At press time, Anyinam and his colleagues are in the early planning stages of data collection and hope to launch their project next fall. Eventually, their project will help us understand how to shape effective programming.

"SSHRC funding totally made this possible," he says. “Unfortunately there’s not much funding typically available to engage in this kind of innovation."

Monica McGlynn-Stewart has partnered with a large Toronto area school board to develop an open-ended tablet app that allows kindergarten-aged children to take photographs, draw on blank slides, and voice over an explanation of what they’ve done. From there, they’ve introduced the program to a number of Junior and Senior Kindergarten classrooms, where staff are instructed on how to use the technology and, crucially, the technology’s efficacy can be measured.

"It’s a way for young children to narrate their learning," McGlynn-Stewart explains. The advantages are multifold: the process allows for oral language development, reflective learning, and problem-solving in terms of both learning how to use the technology, and to become active digital media producers and content creators. The app will also help classroom teachers understand how to effectively incorporate technology in their teaching.

"We’re interested in the children’s learning but also the educator’s learning," says McGlynn-Stewart. “When we were learning to become teachers we didn’t learn appropriate pedagogies around these new technologies. This project will help us understand how to shape effective programming.”

With SSHRC funds, McGlynn-Stewart and her team were able to buy more iPads for the 14 classrooms involved in the project, in addition to hiring four research assistants to go into those classrooms every week to troubleshoot technological problems. And, because of the funding, the study can now be extended for a total of three years. This allows its investigative researchers more time for focus groups and workshops.

"We want to bring the educators together so they can share ideas," says McGlynn-Stewart. In the meantime, they’re working toward developing website to put up their findings and provide ongoing classroom support.

In collaboration with the CAMH, and under partnership with the Canadian Centre for Victims of Torture (CCVT), George Brown’s Jaswant Bajwa has undertaken a research study to facilitate the post-secondary success of previously politically oppressed newcomers to Canada.

“The needs of this community are not high on any political agenda, but they’re critical,” says Bajwa. Her project’s goal is, simply, to see that learners from all backgrounds are able to access education. Specifically, the project seeks to create innovation to identify the needs and barriers of victims of torture, and bridge the gap to address these needs. From there, Bajwa aims to develop a curriculum that would then be piloted at a yet-to-be determined location—potentially, at George Brown College.

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