Once homeless, SOJC prof's experience now guides research

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When assistant professor of public relations Autumn Shafer was 8, her family was homeless. School became her haven during that difficult time — somewhere she could eat a hot meal, stay warm and learn about the world.

Shafer has been a strong advocate for the value of education ever since. The first in her family to attend college, she earned a bachelor's degree as a scholarship student, then completed a master's and doctorate in communication after five years working in public relations.

Now, as an assistant professor in the UO School of Journalism and Communication, Shafer's top priorities are building community among her students and sparking their passion for education and research.

"Great professors who mentored me are a big reason why I'm in academia. I want to give back to students what others gave to me," Shafer said. "Public relations is a great fit, because the industry is about creating meaningful relationships. I try to do that in every class I teach."

Building a Community for Students

Knowing that students can struggle when they're away from home for the first time, Shafer says she tries to make her office a welcoming place. She encourages them to seek her out for advice and assistance and to get to know other students who can act as a support network. She also manages a Facebook group where alumni can help each other network and find jobs.

"Professor Shafer gives each student who enters her office special attention, because she truly cares about their education and future," said Delaney DiGiovanni, who graduated cum laude from the public relations program in 2017 and is now attending law school. "She always made me feel like my questions were relevant and constantly interacted with my ideas."

Because of the challenges she faced growing up, Shafer says she has a great deal of empathy for students who are facing difficulties. She even tries to make her classes more affordable.

"I don't have a textbook in my research methods class, because those textbooks are usually really expensive," she said. "I've designed the course with enough information in my slides and notes that they can use that as a textbook."

Leading Undergraduate Research

Though her early career focused on political campaigns, Shafer eventually found her niche in health communication — a field she says is "all about understanding your target publics and trying to put yourself in their shoes."

One of her first health communication studies, conducted as a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, examined the promotional communications for a human papillomavirus vaccine. Shafer conducted focus groups with mothers of preteen daughters in rural areas around the state to identify barriers to adoption of the vaccine, which informed messaging for its promotion. She discussed some of her research during an interview on UO Today.

As a professor, Shafer's goal is to include students in her research as much as possible.

When she was a faculty member at Texas Tech University in 2015, she co-founded Define Your Line, a campaign to educate students about sexual consent. She worked with students to develop research-based tactics — including brainstorming an engaging name — to get the message to the audiences that most needed to hear it.

She said the campaign successfully improved students' recognition and understanding of consensual communication. She also published a paper about Define Your Line, which ran for two years at Texas Tech and has since been adopted at other universities.

Shafer's research spans other public interest topics as well. Examples include her research on how youth use mass transit and a study examining the effects of the children's television program "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" on preschoolers' empathy, self-esteem and social outcomes.

She published a journal article about the latter study, supported by Fred Rogers Productions, that won the International Communication Association's Children and Media Division's best published article award in 2018.

At the UO, Shafer incorporates her expertise in health communication into her public relations courses to help the university's health promotion office research issues important to students, such as establishing healthy sleep habits, testing for sexually transmitted infections, reducing e-cigarette use and accessing campus mental health services.

"I meet with the university's office of health promotion before each term and ask what big issues students are facing around campus and campaigns that might be coming up in the next year or so," Shafer said. "They give me a list of ideas, and I present those to the students, who research ways to support the campaigns."

Mentoring the Next Generation

Shafer's classes highlight the importance of research in strategic communication. Undergraduate public relations and master's students in the school's advertising and brand responsibility program learn how research is used in their fields and conduct their own studies in her Strategic Communication Research course.

With Shafer's help, School of Journalism and Communication students have analyzed social media competitors such as Uber and Lyft, Nike and Adidas, and Kim and Kylie Kardashian. They have conducted usability testing on the websites of companies like Taco Bell and Columbia Sportswear to determine how the organizations could improve their communication.

And last term, they surveyed more than 1,500 of their fellow UO students on such topics as e-cigarette use, condoms and food insecurity.

"I enjoy working with students to figure out what questions they have and how research can answer them," Shafer said. "It is so exciting to fan that spark of curiosity."

Some of her students have even conducted their own studies after the class was over, with Shafer's help.

Sydney Grant, who graduated from the public relations program in 2018, did a content analysis of the MTV People's Choice Awards because she was passionate about music and wanted to showcase more research experience in her portfolio. After working with Shafer to find a project that was interesting to her, Grant compared musicians' Instagram posts before and after their award nominations to see what strategies they used to garner votes.

Sarah Arnell, who graduated in 2017, wanted more research experience in environmental communication. She compared the Twitter presences of four environmental organizations to find out what types of tweets were best at motivating engagement. Arnell's study was selected for the 2016 UO Undergraduate Research Symposium.

"Dr. Shafer's passion for research and what she teaches is so infectious that it inspires her students to take on research of their own, which she's always eager to help with," said Bridget Weitman, a 2018 public relations graduate who is now a leadership development consultant in St. Louis. "I appreciated her commitment and empathy as her student and advisee, and I appreciate it even more now as I begin my career. I am a more capable strategic communicator because she went above and beyond as a professor."

—By Randy Newnham, School of Journalism and Communication

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