



Student Community Involvement

Teaching Beyond the Podium Podcast

Alexandra

Hello. My name is Alexandra Bitton-Bailey. And welcome to the Teaching Beyond the Podium podcast series. This podcast is on teaching and learning, and our guests offer their best tips, strategies, innovations, and stories about teaching. In the Office of Teaching Excellence at the University of Florida, we have the good fortune to get to know some extraordinary folks across our campus. Faculty, staff, administrators, and students alike color our world with their great ideas and inspiring stories. I have to say though, that one of our most frequent and fun visitors is our guest today, Kevin Baron.

Kevin Baron

My name is Kevin Baron. I'm with the Bob Graham Center for Public Service. I came to UF eight years ago for graduate school in political science and never left. So I started at the Graham Center three and a half years ago, where I am the co-coordinator of civic engagement. And what that really means is, I run a lot of our student programs that focus on things like internships, undergraduate research-- I teach our online civics course for the center as well. So mostly, I interact with the students, and those are generally undergraduate students.

Alexandra

In the years since Kevin has been with the Bob Graham Center for Student Engagement, Kevin has helped to coordinate and develop a number of programs that get students out of their seats and into the streets, engaged in government and civic work. One of the most successful programs is the Tallahassee internship in legislative and executive roles.

Kevin Baron

So the one big one that we do is our Tallahassee internship. So every spring semester we send between 15 to 20 students to Tallahassee. Most of them work in a legislative office, so they're working either for the Florida house or the Florida senate, although we do get students sometimes in executive offices with the governor. Or occasionally, we've had students with lobbying firms.

And actually, I think this year for the first time, we have two Tallahassee interns who are interning with the Supreme Court of Florida. And so the great thing about that program-- I mean, aside from actually being in Tallahassee during the legislative session-- which if anybody has never been in Tallahassee, I highly recommend it. It's only 60 days a year that our legislature is in session. And it is a crazy 60 days. But it gives the students a feel for what Florida politics really is all about.

I mean most of them, as I said, are in legislative offices. So they're meeting with constituents. They're meeting with lobbyists. They're helping-- some are writing bills that will be introduced. They're sitting in hearings on various topics and subjects, usually depending on what member they are working for. So they work full time, and they are considered a legislative assistant, or some type of staff assistant.

So these are not-- they're fetching coffee and answering phones. There's a little bit of that, too, but-- because the office staff is so small. But they're really doing the meaningful work of what it means to work in government in politics, at least at the state level.

Alexandra

Kevin has also helped to initiate a number of other programs and internships around Florida. This includes the city of Gainesville fellowship program, which has been very successful.

Kevin Baron

We have other internships. We do local government internships and a city of Gainesville fellowship. And that one's really cool. It's only been around for two years. And that we did in conjunction with the city of Gainesville. And so we take four students-- each in a specific area. And so the nice thing is this reaches students from all across campus. So one of the positions is for engagement. One is for design and planning. One is for digital services. And one is research and prototyping.

And so the students come from all different colleges across campus, because they have certain skill sets that they're looking for. So we can pull from fine arts in the design side, just as we can pull for research and prototyping. I mean there's a half dozen colleges that students could come from for that. And it's two semesters-- it's fall and spring semester. It's a paid internship as well. They work about 15 hours a week.

But as the city of Gainesville is-- in rolling out this-- they've got this whole plan to remake the city over the next decade. They're calling it this-- Gainesville is a 21st Century City. It's-- they want to make it what they're calling a citizen centered city. And part of that, of course, means that they need to work closely with the university, because the university is such a big part of the city.

Alexandra

The students who had the opportunity to work in the city of Gainesville fellowship were able to present 28 projects-- that they were able to complete over the course of the academic year-- to the city commission. Now, these projects truly helped the city of Gainesville become a 21st century, citizen focused city, and continue to impact the people of Gainesville.

Kevin Baron

When we think about local government-- well, probably most folks don't think about local government-- but so much of our day to day interactions is with local government, is with the city of Gainesville or Alachua County. And so as the city and the county are beginning to try to rebuild to meet the needs of what 21st century Gainesville and UF looks like, it's really simple stuff. And so the students were getting this great perspective of, they told them early on, stuff like, go to the DMV and stand in line to get a form for something.

And then completely monitor what your entire experience was, and then write it out, like, what happened? How long did you wait in line? What were your individual interactions like? It's trying to see the government service side from the receiving side. So what is the citizen's interaction with, so I ride the bus a lot-- which I can't knock the bus service here. It's really nice, overall.

And-- but it's one of those things. So what is that normal experience for a bus rider like? And how can they make improvements to this? So using the app that they have now, where you can track all the buses, is something which works pretty well most of the time. But it was things like that. How technology can be integrated and used, how the citizens' perspective can be brought in to help try and improve services, and all that.

Alexandra

Now that this Gainesville fellowship program is well underway, Kevin has a new program he's working on. It's a virtual internship modeled on the State Department's virtual internships. And this internship is unique in that it can be done locally, without the need to travel or move.

Kevin Baron

What it means is you can stay in Gainesville-- or actually wherever you are, because it is open to UF online students as well as any residential UF student-- and that it pairs you with an office. Most of the offices are either nonprofits or more local government kind of offices or policy focused offices, doing work on projects. And so a lot of them tend to be a bit more PR communications heavy. But we have had some that students are doing policy advocacy work,

doing with one office with the iCivics, which is a national nonprofit that does, as they call it, edutainment.

They do a civics based games for K12 curriculum. And so we've had students working with them that do curriculum development, and help contribute to the creation of some of their games, as well as doing some of the social media managing-- things like that and so. The nice thing is that as an internship experience, I would call it an entry level kind of experience. Because it gives you some traditional elements of an internship, but it overcomes geography and economics. Because you can stay enrolled here in school full time.

Alexandra

Kevin also works diligently to develop opportunities for students to do research on and off campus. His hope is that students will learn about issues by looking at specific topics that impact state and citizens.

Kevin Baron

This program initially was developed as an education program, to really just give students-- kind of get their feet wet on what research means. And so it's grown a bit since then, so that the actual research that they're doing is very usable and viable. Where kind of in the beginning, we wanted it to be more about the experience-- the learning experience for the students-- but now it's both, which is really nice.

Normally, we'll take 50 students every spring semester. And every student's assigned a county in the state of Florida. And we have a research topic. So this year is affordable housing in Florida. Last year was access to voting. The year before was early childhood education. So we pick a issue that, generally, is something that is having an impact on the state. We try not to make it too political, although the access to voting one was far more about infrastructure, as opposed to the politics of it.

But you know, once you start talking about voting. But regardless, like this year, for affordable housing-- I mean affordable housing as a topic is massive. And it covers so many different areas. So we can be talking about the social side of things-- health and medical issues, homelessness, all kinds of problems that arise from people who don't have stable housing. We can talk about different government programs from the Department of Housing and Urban Development at the federal level, down to the state level, down to the local level.

Alexandra

One of the most valuable aspects of this research project is that students not only learn about an issue in a given county through resources and readings, but students actually conduct interviews

of people who are locally involved with this issue in the county they're studying. Students develop the skills to interview, and the ability to understand the challenges specific communities face.

Kevin Baron

They actually have to go and conduct two to three interviews, in-person, with somebody in their county who is working on the issue. So that can be a government official. That can be a nonprofit organization. It could be some other stakeholder or someone who delivers service, or even a recipient of the services, to give them an understanding of what's actually going on at the ground level in their counties. So like I said, money, of course, is always a big one. So I've told them when they go and interview folks, if you're asking them, they say, well, we need more money. Follow up to that. What would you use the money for?

Alexandra

This is particularly interesting, because it requires students to be critical thinkers as they travel to their respective counties and use their work and new found understanding of these specific issues to create reports and resources that can ultimately help shape future policies.

Kevin Baron

Think about what challenges do the populations that they're trying to serve face? And where are they falling short on that? Or maybe some counties-- especially, probably, your larger or more urban counties-- may have programs in place specific to the county that the county has decided to do. That's something that's really workable, that could be replicated in other counties. And so it's both the good and the bad kind of thing, to get a feel for what's working, what isn't, and what challenges are there.

And then the students write a report identifying some of the key issues within the state. And that, again, can be good or bad. And then I have them make a policy proposal-- so looking at where the challenges are, what they think could be done. What's one thing that could be implemented, or a policy that could be changed that could make an impact on that issue or on that challenge that could be positive?

Alexandra

Kevin also helps organize as Civic Scholars Program, and students involved in this project identify issues within their community that they are truly passionate about, and propose ideas, solutions, or products that can impact the community facing this challenge.

Kevin Baron

Any student-- team of students can apply. It happens every spring and we open those up to-- usually at least a team of three to five UF students. And those can be undergrad or graduate students-- doesn't matter. But it's supposed to be a collaborative project. But it gives the students a chance to identify an issue or a project that's community based, that moves beyond just the campus, that they want to tackle. And these grants will fund upwards of \$5,000 to get them going on this.

But we leave it up to the students on what they want to do. And many have come in with a lot of creative ideas that are very community based. So we've done things from community gardens. There's a great program called Pass That Book, that's gone on now-- they've done it for the last three years. And the students who work on that program-- I mean, they're fantastic. They worked with publishing companies, and got tons of books donated. They worked with the local elementary schools to bring the books to the schools.

The purpose, in part, was to get books that demonstrate diversity in all different kinds of fashion, and expose kids to that, on top of encouraging reading, on top of giving students an actual book. Which, there's a lot of kids in schools who have never owned their own book-- had a book to take home with them. And so they encouraged this program then, where they bring the books to them. The students read them. And then they share with each other in the class. And they trade books with each other. And then the girls-- the students who run the program have also hosted community based events that bring the schools and the parents together around these issues and it's been hugely successful.

Alexandra

These grant funded fellowships have an incredible impact on the communities and citizens they're intended to serve. Equally significant is the transformative learning that the students have during the weeks and months of hands on work they do. Most significant for the students though, is the ability to actually see, concretely, the change their work affects.

Kevin Baron

The experience that the students get in doing these projects is so much more meaningful than I think anything we can teach them in the classroom. You can tell them till you're blue in the face how important some of this stuff is. But when they actually go out and experience it for themselves-- when they're talking one on one with somebody, or they're working with a group of elementary school kids and seeing the impact of what they're doing in those kids' faces-- I mean, that's priceless.

You can't do better than that. So it's that type of hands on education piece. It's the experience. I mean, this is what we talked about with experiential learning-- that makes the difference between

just what driving theory and best practices, and this is what you should be doing, and write me essays on this-- to go out and do something in the community or go interview a government official about this issue, gives an entirely different perspective.

Alexandra

I know what you're thinking-- this sounds great. And it's clear and obvious how it can easily be applied to a social science course focused on civic engagement. But can it really work in an arts history course or a chemistry course? Well, Kevin thinks it can.

Kevin Baron

I definitely believe that this can be applied to any field-- to any major, to any department, to any faculty member, any teacher. It's just about rethinking a little of how you're doing things. So if you look at what the goals are of a class, or even of just a lesson perhaps, as a piece of a class-- or for faculty members, it could even be research that they're working on, where they could bring some students on board-- it's just shifting a little bit of how you focus. That's why I like our city fellowship example, because it shows that when it comes to local government, anything that a student is majoring in at this university is applicable to the city of Gainesville.

Alexandra

Getting started is actually pretty simple. The first step is thinking about who your community partners might be, or the areas that your students might study.

Kevin Baron

I mean, if you're thinking about doing anything in the community, it would be beginning to identify who in the community would be a good point of contact. So depending on what you're looking at doing, that could be a government office. It could be a nonprofit organization. It could be some community based group. It might just be some social group you know that gets together once a week to talk about something interesting.

I mean, who knows? It's Gainesville. There's probably all kinds of crazy stuff that goes on in groups that meet. Or it could be focusing in on particular areas, maybe, geographically speaking, or looking at if it's an issue thing-- looking at a community in need and understanding then what their needs are. What resources are already available and what may be lacking?

Alexandra

So does this work out easily every time? Not necessarily. Even Kevin has faced multiple challenges. So thinking about the possible challenges and barriers your students might face is important, but the value is in trying, and refining the process as you go. Trying something new and exciting in your class adds excitement and value to your course. But just let students know that you're trying this out for the first time, and that if something doesn't go quite right, they can come to you.

Kevin Baron

So the first year that we did the Civic Scholars Program-- it was 2011-- and Bob Graham, when he was in the Senate, was chair of the Joint Committee on Intelligence. So intelligence issues and national security issues were a big deal for him. This is the 10 year anniversary of 9/11. They chose his-- he pushed-- the topic for that year was preparedness for a WMD attack at the county level.

So we sent students out to all the counties trying-- so, put yourself in the position of a government official where you get a random phone call from somebody, hi. I'm a student at the University of Florida. How prepared is your county for a WMD attack? We ran into a whole host of issues that year, where counties were calling our office. A lot of people were very concerned as to why-- whether this was a legitimate thing. What was going on? It created a bit of a host of issues. So learned a lot that year, that those kinds of topics, you just don't want to. Yeah.

I especially-- it was rough for a few of our international students, who would go and so-- again, you're thinking a rural Florida county, a student-- an international student with an accent and foreign name asking about preparedness for things like chemical or biological weapons. It created some issues.

Alexandra

Trying new things out in your courses can produce exceptional outcomes. But the real measure of success is the long term impacts exponential learning can have on students.

Kevin Baron

My favorite stories we had at a student-- she graduated a few years ago. But she had been a Tallahassee intern for Darren Soto, who, out of that internship, she ended up getting a job offer with the DNC. She went and worked for them through the 2016 presidential cycle, and then is now Darren Soto's policy advisor, because he ran for and is now a member of the House of

Representatives. And so he hired her on because of the contact she had made with him in her Tallahassee internship.

Alexandra

Kevin hopes to offer students a lifelong love of learning through his experiential classroom activities. His experience is that if students' interest can be sparked early on-- if students are able to see the potential impacts of their work-- then they will remain engaged global citizens.

Kevin Baron

What I like about these programs is that it gives the students a sense of what we like to call effective citizenship, right? That we're all part of different communities. We're all part of a bigger community, and being active matters. We've lost a lot of that. We talk about a lack of social capital in the United States. This is rebuilding some of that. And if we can target students even at the undergraduate level here, and they begin to see how these kinds of experiences benefit bigger communities, benefit more than just them-- does benefit them, too. I mean-- but that's nothing wrong.

This is stuff that they, more often than not, will continue to do throughout the rest of their lives. And it doesn't matter what their major is, or what career path they're on, or what they end up doing for work. They understand better how those connections matter, and can be active in doing more than throughout their lives, which is what we hope for.

Alexandra

Thank you for listening to this episode of the Teaching Beyond the Podium podcast series. We're happy that you joined us, and we hope to see you next time for more tips, strategies, and ideas on teaching and learning at the University of Florida.