

Public Discourse Student Stories  
Written by Mariah Wika '15

**Name:** Brian Simons '14

**Year in school when he took Public Discourse:** Sophomore

**Major:** Communication Studies with an Economics and Management minor

Public Discourse projects often develop through life experiences and moments where you participate in something and think, "Wow. This could really be changed for the better." The summer before his sophomore year, Brian Simons was a dietary assistant at Sanford Health, a hospital in Sioux Falls, SD. As he carted food up and down to the different floors of the hospital, Brian realized that there was not enough signage around the elevator areas. Visitors rode the employee elevators, and employees rode the visitor elevators. Brian was concerned that visitors on the employee elevator could potentially delay the transfer of a critically injured patient to the operating room or other facilities. Hospitals should run smoothly and efficiently, and Brian quickly realized that a simple lack in signage was encouraging just the opposite.

When Brian began Public Discourse the fall semester of his sophomore year, he was thinking about how to improve elevator traffic issues at Sanford Health. He made it his goal to find a way to address this problem. With key contacts already in place, Brian had a solid base to begin work on his project. Brian researched how other hospitals addressed such problems and was able to find journal articles that cited the need for clear signage in hospitals. Brian communicated with hospital administrators in numerous departments, ranging from marketing to maintenance. With one successful phone call or e-mail at a time, Brian made progress towards reaching his goal. With his research, Brian was able to convince the hospital administration of the need for better signage at the elevators. By the end of the semester, new signage was in place, and Brian was able to observe its positive impact on employees and visitors alike.

Brian is certain that the lessons he learned from Public Discourse will be applicable to his life for years to come. He gained the ability to network within a system and learned that he had the ability to accomplish tasks that he previously thought impossible. Brian also is interested in working for a health care organization and is grateful for how effectively Public Discourse intertwined with his potential career plans. Brian has always wanted to work towards improving society and changing it for the better. Public Discourse taught him that he had that ability. Now more than ever, he catches himself considering issues and asking, "What could I do to improve this?"

**Name:** Michaela Holm '14

**Year in school when she took Public Discourse:** Sophomore

**Major:** Biology

Michaela Holm entered Public Discourse looking to fulfill a general education requirement. Public Discourse was not her first choice to fulfill the credit, but she registered for it at the urging of her advisor, who stated that all students should take Public Discourse. She was grateful she followed the advice.

Michaela began the semester wanting to do an impressive, large-scale project, but she soon realized that she could have an influence in a smaller community as well. She began to consider areas needing improvement in her former high school. When she was in high school, early release days were intended to be “community service days” for students; however, students had rarely used these days to give back to their community. She believed that she could do something to change this. When Michaela talked to the principal of her high school, her idea was quickly rejected. She was told that efforts had already been made to reform this system and her help was not needed. The principal directed Michaela to the school’s community education director. After investing significant thought and effort, it was challenging for Michaela to have her first idea fail. Some Public Discourse students experience such setbacks, but seeing failure as a lesson, rather than a roadblock kept Michaela moving forward. Resilience and persistence play an integral role in making change.

Michaela knew that the community service director recently started a program where students had the opportunity to earn a community service letter. Students only had to log 50 hours of community service to receive the letter and could earn more letters with additional service. The letter program started poorly, with only 20 students participating. When they met, the director even told Michaela that he was considering terminating the program because it was unsuccessful in attracting students. Michaela wanted to help the director figure out why the program was not popular and help increase participation.

Michaela used a Facebook survey of 30 students in varying grades at the high school. She found that the majority had never even heard about the letter. She presented this information to the community education director and encouraged him to raise awareness for the program through advertising. She even offered to create posters and form a Facebook group comprised of students working to fulfill the letter. Unfortunately, the director was not enthusiastic about receiving Michaela’s help. Michaela noted, “Once I had said something about it being a school project, I think he didn’t take me seriously. I think that affected the outcome a lot as well. I went back and forth on whether I should have told him or not.” This will be a key decision that you make in your Public Discourse project. In the real world, labeling your civic engagement project as a “school project” may cause you to lose credibility; although, it may be information that you cannot avoid disclosing.

Despite being disappointed by the end result of her project, Michaela believes that the information she presented to the director and conversations that they had ultimately encouraged him to continue the letter program for at least another year. While Michaela wishes that she had

been allowed to contribute more to the program, she still learned valuable skills and personal lessons from Public Discourse.

Speaking in class over the course of the semester challenged Michaela. She learned to be “a little more spontaneous and not so planned out.” This speaking practice led her to feel more comfortable during one-on-one conversations with administrators. She also gained a new perspective and is more aware of opportunities to work for change within her community. Looking back on her Public Discourse experience, this Biology major is happy to say: “I agree with my advisor, I think it is a class that everyone should take. Yes, there are good components of learning how to speak in public, but then it also does open you up to communities and groups of people finding a common goal together.”

**Name:** Lara Younquist '15

**Year in school when she took Public Discourse:** First year

**Major:** Communication Studies

Public Discourse projects can lead students to controversial issues for which they develop a strong passion. This was the case for Lara Younquist when she decided to focus her project on helping women escape careers of prostitution. Many see prostitutes as immoral, but Lara's research uncovered that many of these women did not choose the path of prostitution or wish to continue to live that way. She wanted to help them have a second chance to establish stable lives.

Lara began her project by contacting Breaking Free, a complete recovery center in the Twin Cities that works to get women out of prostitution. She asked what pressing needs existed within the organization that she could address. The director of Breaking Free told Lara that they needed help encouraging companies to hire the women. She gave Lara the freedom to explore different solutions to the problem. Lara's original plan was to connect Breaking Free with a temporary job agency; however, the director of Breaking Free had several concerns with her suggestion and asked her to present a new idea. Lara found herself needing to completely reconstruct her project uncomfortably late in the semester.

Having experience on a resume is a crucial component for anybody trying to land a job. Lara realized that the women assisted by Breaking Free did not have the work experience necessary to build a strong resume. Prostitution is a felony, and employers are extremely hesitant to hire convicted felons. Lara knew that one of the only ways to improve these women's chances for employment was to make it possible for them to have experiences that would be applicable to future careers. She came up with the idea to contact nonprofit organizations throughout the Twin Cities to see if they would offer volunteer opportunities for the women of Breaking Free. The director approved of this idea, and Lara began to contact organizations.

Convincing nonprofits to hire ex-felons as volunteers was a challenge, but Lara continued to work to convince organizations of the value of hiring women from Breaking Free. During the month of August 2012, Lara went to Breaking Free once a week to make phone calls and work with other employees. Progress was slow, but a few organizations accepted the women as volunteers.

Lara learned a multitude of practical skills from her Public Discourse experience. She became more confident in research and found specific information that pertained to her topic. She also learned the most effective ways to contact people in the community and receive a response through strategic phone messages and email. Beyond these skills, Lara realized, "Anybody can make a change in the community—it's easier than you think to bring about change." From Lara's experiences, she suggests that other students remain open to change and accept that your work needs to evolve to address a need in the best possible way. She also advises that students spread out the work involved in Public Discourse. Procrastination will not result in an easy path to success.

**Name:** Valentina Muraleedharan '14

**Year in school when she took Public Discourse:** First year

**Majors:** Communication Studies and Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies

As a child growing up in a small village in Botswana, Valentina Muraleedharan remembers going to school with classmates who were orphaned by HIV/AIDS. HIV is tragically common in her community and her country. In fact, almost one fourth of Botswana's adult population is infected with HIV. Due to her life experiences, Valentina knew that she wanted her Public Discourse project to address a specific need of children who were affected by HIV/AIDS.

It may seem as you read that successful Public Discourse students happen upon brilliant project ideas immediately. Valentina's experience illustrates that the path to developing a project is a process of hard work, brainstorming, and plenty of uncertainty. Valentina was unsure of what the format of her project should be and could not decide where to base her project. She puzzled over whether she should run public HIV tests at Gustavus or work with a group based in the United States. Ultimately, Valentina realized that neither of these options were the answer. As she says, "I realized that the only way I would be able to have my whole heart in it and get this project done was at home." Realizing that it was okay that her project mattered to her, and not the Gustavus community, was an important step for Valentina. Moving beyond the Gustavus community with your project often makes for a better project, is more rewarding, and looks better on a resume.

A Public Discourse project presents challenges no matter where you are working, but attempting to connect with people and organizations in Botswana proved to be very difficult for Valentina. She longed for the sensitivity, emotion, and efficiency of face-to-face interactions. Despite this, she managed to lay the groundwork for her project through phone calls and e-mails. Throughout the semester, Valentina was in contact with different organizations and schools and a few government officials. After talking to her uncle, who is the principal of a school, Valentina considered the exciting potential of building a connection between a school in Botswana and an organization that assisted children affected by HIV. After much thought and conversations with the principal, Valentina decided that she would facilitate a clothing drive at the school and donate items to a facility that provides a home for children of all ages who are orphaned by HIV.

When Valentina implemented her project, she thought, "I knew what I was supposed to do—I just didn't know if it was actually going to happen, which made me super nervous because I had invested a whole semester of my time in truly wanting to do this."

Valentina presented her project to the principal, the vice principal, and heads of department at the school, and then presented her plan to all of the teachers in a staff meeting. The teachers were very excited about making Valentina's clothing drive a sustainable project for the school. The teachers requested that Valentina speak at an all-school assembly so that the students could hear details of the clothing drive directly from her. Valentina had to adjust her presentation in order to communicate her ideas to 5-10 year olds in a clear, understandable way. She said this was a challenge because, "One day I was talking to the minister of health of Botswana, and the next day I was talking to one hundred grade one, two, and three students." Two days later she spoke to the older students as well. Shortly thereafter, the clothing drive was in the school newsletter,

fliers about it were sent home to parents, and Botswana's national television station covered the project. The school became a powerful advocate for Valentina's project. Valentina went to the school every day to find bags and bags of clothing. She sorted through everything, folded all the clothes, and organized the shoes, toys and books. In the end, the school gathered 3,000 items to donate.

At a school-wide assembly, representatives from the daycare attended and received the donations. Valentina spoke, and the pastor who ran the daycare blessed the assembly. The children and teachers were able to see how meaningful their donations were. The national TV station interviewed Valentina and broadcast a story about the collaboration. The school and the care center continue to maintain their connection and work together on clothing drives. Valentina is still in contact with the center, and they keep her updated through their monthly newsletter and e-mails. While Valentina's project was challenging and time consuming, she says: "Especially with Public Discourse, you have to do what matters to you, or you won't enjoy doing it. And so, in doing that I learned a lot about what I'm passionate about. I learned where I find happiness in helping others."

**Name:** Breanne Rentschler '15

**Year in school when you took Public Discourse:** Sophomore

**Majors:** Communication Studies and Economics and Management

Breanne Rentschler lives on a farm and fully understands the importance of agriculture; however, through conversations with others and research, she discovered that very few individuals receive quality agricultural education. Breanne knew from her experiences that agriculture is applicable to everybody's lives and decided that for her Public Discourse project she would work to improve agriculture education in Saint Peter.

Breanne contacted the principal of South Elementary School in Saint Peter and met with three K-3 teachers to discuss the school's current curriculum. She found that after a small unit in kindergarten, students did not have an opportunity to learn more about agriculture until one elective option in high school. Breanne made several instrumental connections at the beginning of her project. The teachers were enthusiastic, and she gained the support of the Future Farmers of America (FFA) advisor at the high school. Creating advocates for your cause is the key to a successful Public Discourse project. Breanne says, "Talk to as many people as you can about your project. The more people who know about your project, the more people can help you make connections with others."

After significant research, brainstorming, and discussion, Breanne decided to create a Barnyard Day for students from South Elementary School. She designed the day to include stations featuring livestock and interactive learning experiences for young students. For example, children would learn about the dairy industry by visiting a station with a cow and different dairy products. Breanne and the teachers worked to determine the best time of year, where to host the Barnyard Day, and what learning materials are the most accessible for children. Many high school FFA members raise animals on their farm and volunteered to show their animals at Barnyard Day. Breanne hopes that South's Barnyard Day will become an annual event and that more kids will be inspired to get involved in agriculture.

Through her Public Discourse experience, Breanne learned important lessons about time management. She says, "Get started right away on your project because you are going to have to work with other people's schedules, and they're not necessarily on the same deadlines that you are." Breanne also learned how to explore a topic with greater attention to detail. After needing to investigate a problem thoroughly and create a plausible plan, Breanne now examines her own work and her peers' work with a more critical eye.

**Name:** Nick Dale '16

**Year in school when you took Public Discourse:** First year

**Major:** Psychological Science

Public Discourse projects can stem from personal experiences that influence those we care about. For example, Nick Dale saw a friend struggle with alcoholism in her family, especially during her high school years. When considering possible Public Discourse projects, he decided to focus his project on helping other high school students influenced by alcohol abuse in their families. Nick was aware a variety of resources provided support for alcoholics, but he was concerned that very few well-known or effectively advertised options existed for students influenced by alcoholism in their families. He hoped to create a high school support group where students could get help, talk, and share common concerns and knowledge.

Nick began his project by investigating support groups sponsored by Al-Anon/Alateen. He considered trying to implement an Alateen group at the school but ultimately decided that a customized program would be more beneficial. Nick then turned to a counselor he had known well in high school and discussed the possibility of creating a group. She verified that students were seeking support and offered her help. Nick also discussed his project with other students to ensure that his project would benefit their community.

Eventually, Nick presented the project to six counselors, two health teachers, and the principal of his high school. He explained how alcoholism affects high school students and articulated his goals for the group. As you have read, Nick did significant research and work to get to this point. His cause was worthy, he had valuable connections, and he presented a solid plan, but the path your project takes can be unpredictable. While the counselors and health teachers supported Nick's plan wholeheartedly, the high school principal was patronizing and questioned Nick's credibility because of his age. She quickly shut down his project.

Nick was disappointed and frustrated by his principal's reaction, but he quickly rebounded and restructured his project. He says, "Stay calm, and carry on. There are so many times where you'll want to give up, but you have to work around it. It will turn around." Nick was relieved to find a more welcoming environment at his local church. The congregation was enthused about his ideas and willing to volunteer. The support group serves teens and is connected to a youth group. With the help of his younger sister, Nick developed the group during the summer. He hopes that the group will continue to meet weekly or bi-weekly and will become a safe, comfortable space for teens to connect with a supportive, understanding community.

Nick's project pushed and challenged him, but he is grateful for all that he learned from his Public Discourse experience. He says, "Public Discourse really shows what you're passionate about. I knew I was somewhat passionate about other problems that I could have done, but would I have felt like I really did something? Once I chose this project, I knew that I could go home and feel like it helped me and other people personally."

**Name:** Kacie Foster '15

**Year in school when you took Public Discourse:** Sophomore

**Majors:** Communication Studies and Music

Kacie Foster knew she wanted to be a part of a musical ensemble at Gustavus; however, when she tried out and made it into Gustavus' Vasa Wind Orchestra, she discovered a significant discrepancy between the Vasa Orchestra and Gustavus' top orchestra, the Gustavus Wind Orchestra. The Vasa Orchestra did not challenge Kacie and many of her peers. In fact, some felt it resembled a step back to high school orchestra. It soon became clear to Kacie that large ensemble opportunities at Gustavus were not properly serving the current student body. With the goal of improving the Gustavus experience for herself and other musicians, Kacie decided to attempt to address this problem for her Public Discourse project.

Kacie began her project by having conversations with students and faculty members involved with the music department. As she expected, many individuals she spoke with shared her concerns and were quick to support her project. Connections were key for Kacie. She had to prove that this was not a personal concern; it was a concern shared by many students and faculty. Kacie also did research to determine causes of the current problem, harms, and potential solutions to the problem. Kacie discovered that the music department's strategic plan included significantly increasing the number of music majors. With limited large-ensemble opportunities for admitted students, Kacie saw growth as an unrealistic goal.

After researching the extent of the problem through many conversations, Kacie decided that the best course of action would be to propose to the music department that there should be a third large ensemble that would serve as an intermediate group between the two and help students in the Vasa Orchestra progress toward the Gustavus Wind Orchestra. She chose to propose the idea to the student music council, the musical department chair, and the string orchestra director. Notice that Kacie's action step was not idealistically ambitious. She was aware that the goal of a third orchestra was a complex one and that a proposal was a logical, important step on its own.

Kacie's proposal was well received. She brought a perspective to the table that had not been fully understood and started an important conversation about the future of music at Gustavus. Despite the positive reception of Kacie's proposal, other pressing issues within the department had precedence. The department informed Kacie that they wanted to increase their music students but did not realistically have the capacity to do so. Ultimately, they informed her that the music building is just too small and cannot house rehearsals for another ensemble. You may also find in your research that your problem is just a link in a chain of challenging problems. Try not to be discouraged. Your project is still important, but you must remember that more immediate causes may need to be addressed before your project can become a priority.

Kacie's Public Discourse project was often challenging, but the lessons she learned were invaluable. She says: "The process of completing this project really taught me a lot about what one person has the potential to do, and you should do it instead of leaving voices unheard. That's what being a leader is—taking the initiative to address something even if others are afraid to do so." Kacie encourages Public Discourse students to take advantage of opportunities for collaboration, always plan ahead, and pick a topic that is personally meaningful to you.