

Cara Dingus Brook

Written by Katie Kotowski

As an Ohio University graduate student, I found myself in a graduate assistantship at the George V. Voinovich School of Leadership and Public Affairs (GVS). After two quarters at the School, and only one quarter before graduation, I began contemplating how my work would impact both my personal and professional life. How would this experience be helpful? And what could I do to make it more valuable?

Not long after these questions began to arise, I had the opportunity to talk with a past GVS student, Cara Dingus Brook, president/CEO of the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio. Her enthusiasm for the Voinovich School was encouraging and contagious. She quickly eased my mind and made me excited about the important role the Voinovich School will always play in my life.

Brook was introduced to the Voinovich School as an undergraduate in the Ohio University Honors Tutorial College studying English. She was chosen as a Voinovich Undergraduate Research Scholar and was placed in the Foundation for Appalachian Ohio as a chance to apply what she had learned in the classroom to a real-world experience. Previously, she said she had not even considered philanthropy or the role it would play in her world allowing this experience to open her up to a whole new world of exciting challenges and rewarding experiences.

According to Brook, having the opportunity to work closely with what she called “a small non-profit with a mighty mission” at The Foundation for Appalachian Ohio as an undergraduate was an exciting experience. She attended trustee meetings and took minutes, assisted with research studies, participated in grant making, and helped evaluate the Foundation’s projects. Since her projects ran the gamut, she gained a greater understanding of how to apply her skills in a way that would make a difference. Until that moment she had had all the passion but was lacking the situation to employ it.

“As an English major, people always asked ‘So you want to teach?’” she said.

“[Working with the Voinovich School and the Foundation] gave me the opportunity to see how I could apply my creative abilities to service the world... I had dreamed of doing this one day.”

The introduction to the world of philanthropy was, according to Brook, the most valuable part of her experience at the Voinovich School. In addition, she stressed the importance of having the opportunity to put the critical thinking, analytical, and communication skills that she had learned in the classroom to use and seeing that these skills can be used to “make such a remarkable difference.”

“It is an extremely satisfying experience to use the materials learned in class to make a difference... it doesn’t matter if you are examining watersheds or working with non-profits, all

the opportunities at the Voinovich School allow you apply your skills in a real world situation... it is very exciting and encouraging," she said.

Looking back upon her time at the Voinovich School, Brook thought about the changes that have occurred. She specifically mentioned the growth from a center to a school, and noted that this change truly highlights the progress that has been made by the Voinovich School to build the capacity of the region and impact countless lives. She expressed hope that the Voinovich School will continue to grow and gain support.

As our conversation came to a close, I asked if she might leave some words of wisdom on how I, and the other students, could make our time at the Voinovich School more valuable.

"Take advantage of every learning opportunity and be inquisitive," she said.

"Also, keep a work journal. Keep a journal of what you learn, your questions, your perceptions, what you are seeing, the things your mentors said... you will be so glad. When you look back you will see that its treasures remain true. I recently looked back at my work journals and they still inspire me."

And, for the alumni of the school, Brook also had a suggestion.

"Continue to look at the school as a resource... be involved, keep in touch... view it as a continual relationship," she said.