

NARRATOR: Community partnerships are one way RIT provides its students with experiential learning opportunities. In this episode of Intersections: The RIT Podcast, James Winebrake, dean of the College of Liberal Arts, and Juilee Decker, associate professor of museum studies, talk about a unique partnership between the college and one of the Finger Lakes Region's cultural gems, the Genesee Country Village & Museum.

JAMES: One of the things that I often ask people to think about is to think about the experiences that were really transformative when they were undergraduate students. And more often than not, in fact probably 99 times out of 100, it's not an experience of sitting in a classroom listening to a faculty member lecture. It's usually something outside the classroom where the person was engaged either working with a faculty member on a research project, or working on a student club, or taking something they learned in a classroom and applying it in a real world setting. And that type of experiential learning, I think, is really powerful and really transformative.

JUILEE: We're both at RIT, so if you think of our community, all this growth that students have as learners doesn't always happen in a classroom, and that's the beauty of that, as a faculty member from my perspective. Seeing that growth occur over time and also helping the students discern where they might test the waters, or take an internship or a co-op, or be engaged in a project in a meaningful way.

JAMES: I think part of it, too, the philosophy that we certainly have here is that the university is part of the community in which it resides and that we're not in an ivory tower. And so there's these great student learning experiences, but it's also part of our duty as a university and a part of this larger community to engage with the community. So, I know you've been doing some amazing work, working with a lot of the cultural institutions in the Rochester area, especially with the Genesee Country Village & Museum.

JUILEE: Yeah, so we're fortunate we have a partnership with the museum. I kind of think of it as two ways of becoming engaged as a museum-university partnership, and one of them is predicated upon a need at the museum. How can RIT, with this huge ecosystem that we have, help the museum to solve a problem? It's not to do the work for the museum, but rather think about a problem and try and come up with a creative solution. And the other facet is where something is inspired by research or an interest from faculty at RIT – faculty and students who are interested in using the museum as a site for an opportunity, some experience, some research. One of the examples that I think speaks well to the museum need is, we've done a project where the museum needed hands for Victorian mannequins, mannequins that would fit Victorian clothing.

And so the museum creates the mannequins themselves and creates the bodies and the forms. The need was to have hands so that gloves and parasols and all sorts of accessories that would be handheld could actually be positioned on the mannequin and look natural, because the Victorian body size was smaller than our body size today. I mean, you could buy these hands, but that might not be cost effective. So the museum came to us through the RIT-GCVM partnership and said, "Can you help us to solve this dilemma? We need hands and we have mannequins and we need hands to put on the mannequins." Thinking of what resources we have here at the university and how we can solve this problem, the solution resided in our Construct, which is the RIT makerspace. What resources are there? And one of them was the 3D printer, so a couple of students developed a prototype. Long story short, created 3D printed hands, which were then attached to the mannequins. And after several iterations the hands were 3D printed, and then sanded, and then painted the same color as the mannequin stockings, and then put on view. So if you go to the museum today, you can see these very hands that were printed and created here at RIT. And so that's a very reasonable problem that was very reasonably solved, and it's an amazing outcome because it also serves as a proof of concept for other museums who are facing this problem. And then for the research side, we have several really interesting projects going on, student-led, which I think you, well you're supervising one of those, the student...

JAMES: Yeah, the Oatka Creek project, where they're looking at water quality in Oatka Creek, which runs through the museum property. And again, that's part of conversations with the museum staff about, "What does the trout fishery look like in that creek, and is there a way to kind of revive it and strengthen it?" And so, we're doing a study on water quality, and the RIT-GCVM partnership really almost covers every college on campus when you really about it. Not only do we have students in museum studies and some other liberal arts disciplines working on those, but there's students in computing and in business and in engineering. One of the really cool projects that was done at the Genesee Country Village and Museum was an engineering team that was testing the impact on some of the old glass pane windows at the museum structures, the impact of cannon fire, which is used during civil war reenactments, and the impact of that cannon fire on the structure and the stress on the windows. And so they designed the instrumentation and took a bunch of data, but that's a type of project that is hard to do at a school that doesn't have engineering or some of the technology aspects that RIT does.

JUILLEE: And I think part of that is also just the way that we have crosswalks to all of the colleges within the university. So the example that you just spoke of, Jamie, with the cannon noise abatement project, that was entirely administered through Kate Gleason College of Engineering. But on occasion, individuals from other disciplines outside of

engineering were brought in to give advice on one particular facet. And I think that's one of the reasons that partnerships work so well and have the potential to work so well at RIT is because individuals who have expertise, whether that's faculty or students, are very willing to share that expertise. And I love that. It makes a true sort of crucible of activity. Lots of things going on, lots of potential, lots of ways to answer a question that don't rely or rest upon the shoulders of any one person to solve. There's a real community here that can really help to solve problems, whatever those might be, and I love that.

JAMES: RIT has a real maker culture, too. When the museum needed mannequin hands produced, it was like, "Okay, we can do that we can do that. We can make that stuff!" [laughter]. And so there really is kind of a culture of making and innovation here at RIT that you might not find at other places. I think that also helps move projects along.

JUILLEE: I just had a conversation with a faculty member in the Golisano College of Computing and Information Science. And he identifies as an artist working in the space of computers and technology. And he's interested in working at the Oatka Creek and drawing data from the creek, and then using that data about the life forms in the creek to create visualizations, as real-time visualizations of what is going on in the creek. That's an interesting research project for a faculty member. Does the museum, quote, need that? No, they don't "need" that information. But thinking about the museum as a site, what does that mean? You basically, as a university, we have this playground of sorts where you can think about that as we have a relationship with this institution, they trust us, they trust all the faculty, staff and students at the university to come and do a toe dip and see what might work. And so I'm really excited to continue the conversation with this faculty member to see if he is able to develop a body of work, and he's interested in working with students. You know, what would the output then for that be? Would it be a pop-up exhibit at the museum that features that work on display? Would it be a temporary display at the Oatka Creek at the museum? So there's no limit in terms of a direct path from A to B. The output could vary, and we could do something here as well. So I really like that kind of organic nature of the partnership.

JAMES: Yeah, and I think this partnership, and what we've done with a couple other organizations that we're working with, is it's really symbiotic. It's not a one-way direction of work or flow. But we have a steering committee, and you chair that. And the steering committee is made up of faculty across the institute and it's made up of staff from the museum itself talking about problems and projects and courses. And it's a jointly functioning steering committee that helps direct where the partnership heads. I think that's, in some ways, really unique compared to what other universities are doing and I think it's the reason why the partnership is such a success. And when you have that

type of working relationship, that close-working relationship, it's where you really build trust, as you mentioned, and that's really important to maintain the partnership.

JUILLEE: And I think it's one of those things where students who are involved in the partnership, so like students who were working on the 3D printing, or the students who will become involved in this visualization project, the students that we have working on an augmented reality project with the museum. The students feel as though they're contributing to projects that actually have a deliverable that's seen by more than the 14 or 25 peers in a classroom and that's not working for a grade. There are audiences that are beyond the walls of the university. And as a faculty member, I can say that that does raise the bar in terms of the expectation on the part of the students, that they feel like they are contributing something more meaningful and also they are also very keenly aware that people, meaning the public, can give them feedback that actually can be instructive and helpful. And I think that that helps our students to understand the push and pull of realistic expectations and whether or not something that you perceive to be just right, may not be based upon whoever the person is, or the individual.

JAMES: And I know talking to some of them, when they go to job interviews this is what they talk about. Their experiences at the museum, or at the zoo, or working with our Center for Public Safety initiatives or working for university-community partnership programs, that there's these opportunities they have working in the community, doing experiential learning, engaged scholarship work, the community partners are benefitting, the students are benefitting, the faculty are benefitting, and so it's kind of like a win-win-win. Those are really meaningful conversations they have with future employers and some of the folks I talk to, this is why they believe they've received job offers, is because of these types of experiences.

JUILLEE: Part of what "learning by doing" offers for students is the opportunity to have an authentic experience, like what it is really like being. So to use the museum, Genesee Country Village & Museum as an example: What is it really like to work in a museum and to work with objects and collections? Because in our textbook or in our experiences in class, we have the restraints and constraints of the body of knowledge in the space of the classroom, whatever a textbook is saying or whatever other education material we have. When you work with a community partner, not only do you have the actual physical labor that you're doing, but you also have the expertise of people in that field who do that work, who know far more than whatever any textbook could explain. And so you give the students the opportunity to have this authentic experience and to know, is this really what I love or how broad and wide and deep does the field of collections in museums actually go? We've read about it in a very sort of narrow sense, but it's much more protracted than that.

JAMES: Yeah, the hands-on learning aspect is really important and the benefit of doing this as a student is you get the hands-on learning, but you also have the time and the space back at the university to kind of reflect on this and think about what it means in terms of your own personal growth. I think one of our goals is to make sure every student graduating from RIT has some meaningful experiential learning opportunity. If not for the community partners that we have, the experiences wouldn't be as rich as they are, so the museum I think is a great. The Genesee Country Village & Museum partnership has kind of laid the foundation for how you do these things appropriately and respectfully and correctly and has really established a model that we're now applying to the Seneca Park Zoo Society and Foodlink and talking to some other museums as well about-- and other institutions, about how best to do this and to do this work well.

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