

DIVERSE VOICES

PRODUCED BY THE IUP COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & COMMUNICATIONS DIVERSITY & INCLUSION STANDING COMMITTEE

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Faculty Spotlight: Dr. Kaitlyn Brennan

We recently interviewed Dr. Kaitlyn Brennan, an instructor in the Department of Communication Disorders, Special Education, and Disability Services. This interview coincides with the Sharing Cycle of our conceptual framework, which is intended to share resources, support meaningful exchange of ideas, and increase awareness of diversity and inclusion resources in the College.

You work in a much more densely populated and much more diverse area than Indiana County. However, we do have a significant number of children in our local school district who are not white. What can our small town/university town area do to help these students reach their full potential?

Brennan: Making sure ALL families have the opportunity to get to the table and have the opportunity to have their voices heard is imperative. This goes beyond just an invitation for folks---you must meet people where they are, understand the barriers and actively work to remove those- understand that schools can be a trauma trigger for many based on their lived experience. Having a majority that is not representative of your whole community does offer you the same opportunity to progress- and once you get folks to the table, you must listen, and you must actively work to ensure their voices are heard and action is taken. It is hard work, but anything else is performative.

How does your work with K-12 education translate or interconnect with post-secondary education? Where do you see opportunities for K-12 education and universities to collaborate?

Brennan: Great questions and so much opportunity here. Moving away from the idea that K-12 is the education continuum is a great place to start. If we started examining policies and practices through the cradle through career lens, we may see more opportunities to truly collaborate. From the education perspective I would love to see more opportunities for professional development opportunities from institutions of higher education in collaboration with district partners. This is also a great opportunity to start early recruitment to diversify the educator workforce and address the educator pipeline and dire teacher shortage happening across our country. I truly believe we have all the tools to get this right we just need to come together to do work.

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Who or what resources do you follow for inspiration in this field?

Brennan: My greatest inspiration are the kids, families, and communities who are impacted by this work every day. We often think of schools as the brick-and-mortar structure but they are so much more. If we can build up our schools--- for everyone--we may begin to build equity in our communities. For resources, I belong to a number of coalitions both locally and at the federal level—locally I focus primarily on direct community response and federally I focus more on education policy and how federal dollars are appropriated. I find the coalitions to be a great avenue because there are so many folks with different backgrounds, expertise, experiences—bringing those altogether increases the possibility for the greatest collective impact.

What tips would you give to help the College educate and empower tomorrow's leaders?

Brennan: Encouraging students to think outside of themselves—and often times this means providing them with that experience not simply suggesting it. I have found that people don't know what they don't know- but that's not an excuse anymore. Higher education is uniquely positioned to change the trajectory-no matter the profession- for how our future leaders interface with the world. Secondly, providing students with the right tools to be strong advocates in their field, especially for those whose voices have been silenced for so long. This takes a lot of listening, learning, self-reflection, and uncomfortable conversations-but maybe if we all started here, we just might be able to make a difference.

How do you suggest institutions gain buy-in and momentum from stakeholders?

Brennan: It is my opinion that advocacy should be a part of our fiber and often a lot of that success can come down to relationship building and education. It's complex but a good starting point may be: put in the time to build rapport, make your case but meet people where they are, and keep working towards it every day.

Brennan: How do you overcome hopelessness when stakeholders don't understand the importance of your work?

Just keep it about the work- there is always work that needs to be done.

In addition to her work in our College, Dr. Brennan is an independent Education Policy Consultant. Her work focuses on Pittsburgh public schools, demonstrated through the [A+ Schools Pittsburgh project](#).

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