

SPOTLIGHT

## Collaborative research project to help district serve students of color

By MISTY SCHWAB [mschwab@faribault.com](mailto:mschwab@faribault.com) Jan 11, 2019 Updated Jan 11, 2019



A total of 12 students — six Somali and six Latino — will spend the next few months conducting research for a Community Conversations Research Grant awarded to Carleton College. Twelve parents and six Faribault Schools staff members will also gather research for the study. Pictured with the students in the back left are Community and Civic Engagement Director Arr Gorani and Anita Chikkatur, associate professor of educational studies at Carleton College. (Misty Schwab/Faribault Daily News)

Faribault Public Schools serves a far more culturally diverse population than it did several years ago. From 2010 to 2018, the population of students of color has increased from 25 percent to 55 percent.

With this statistic comes the question of whether or not these students feel Faribault Schools serves their needs and meets their expectations. What is staff doing right? What can staff do better to help this population of students succeed and feel welcome?

Answering these questions takes research, and thanks to a grant awarded to Carleton College last fall, a number of Faribault School District parents, students and staff will play a huge role in the process.

The project involves participatory action research (PAR) conducted by Somali and Latino students, Somali and, Latino parents, and staff working with those students. Collaborating with Carleton College, Somali Resettlement Services and Community without Borders, the five teams will spend the next few months undergoing research training and gathering information from their peers.

Xochilt Navejas, a senior at FHS, applied to become a researcher for the project, expecting it would expand her horizons. As a member of the math team, science team and Student Council, she wanted to participate in a project that welcomes adult perspectives as well.

“I think it really helps my AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) class” Xochilt said Thursday during a kickoff get together. “A lot of my AVID peers are part of the research, and we’ve been together for so long.”

Xochilt’s parents, Amanda and Joe, decided to become parent researchers for the project after hearing about it from their daughter.

“We’re here to support her before she goes to college and has a different experience,” said Joe.

For Stacy Fox, special education teacher at FHS, being a staff researcher for the project means something entirely different.

“Basically I wanted to look at data that would help me serve students and stakeholders, to see what’s going to the best practices for all students,” said Fox.

The federally funded Community Conversations Research Grant, amounting to nearly \$100,000, is a program of the Corporation for National and Community Service. Carleton College is one of two colleges in the nation to receive the grant.

Anita Chikkatur, associate professor of educational studies at Carleton College, will spend the next few months meeting with the researchers, helping each team decide on questions to investigate. Rather than tell each team how to conduct the research, she plans to guide them through the process and help them decide for themselves which approaches to take.

“I think it’s sort of new territory for a lot of us, figuring out how to do this work,” said Chikkatur. “In some ways, you don’t know what you don’t know, and this is a case where that will really be true.”

Chikkatur said the research will also likely benefit a collaborative class between Carleton and St. Olaf College slated for 2020. One major focus of that class will be the refugee backgrounds of students who now live in Faribault.

To kick off the research process, the Faribault District Office hosted a dinner Thursday evening for the staff, students and parents involved in the project. Guest enjoyed a Somali meal prepared by one of the parent researchers as well as Mexican dishes from Grand Plaza restaurant.

Chikkatur and Amel Gorani, director of the college's Center for Community and Civic Engagement as well as FHS Dean of Students Joe Sage spoke about grant's significance during the kickoff program. Sage also introduced some of the key players in the research, including facilitators Abdi Abdullahi, paraprofessional and cultural liaison for Faribault Public Schools, and Cynthia Gonzalez from Community without Borders. Abdullahi will serve as facilitator for Somali parents while Gonzalez facilitates for Latino parents. Sage and Chikkatur both work with student and staff researchers.

"From the high school perspective, we're very excited for an opportunity to have our students and our staff conduct research on our district to help ensure all students are successful and to help us make an impact," said Sage. "We're very, very appreciative of all the partners in the project, specifically Carleton College for the unique experience."

Gorani sees a "reciprocal benefit" to the research, which helps FHS and Carleton College both as individual entities but also as a combined unit that works together for the betterment of neighboring communities. As she said, "At the end of the day, we're not separate."

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Reporter Misty Schwab can be reached at 507-333-3135. Follow her on Twitter @APGmisty.

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## GRANT TIMELINE

The research for the Community Conversations Research Grant follows a timeline as follows:

- January to February 2019: Five research teams meet weekly to get to know one another and learn about participatory action research
- February to March: Each team selects a research question and receives more training.
- April: Each team gathers information and continues research training.
- May: Information is analyzed, and research collect additional research if necessary.

- June: The five teams present their findings.

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**mschwab**