Engaging the Twin Passions of the Professoriate: Scholarship and Teaching

By Dr. Vinita Agarwal, Associate Professor of Communication Arts

Dr. Vinita Agarwal earned her Ph.D. in communication from Purdue University. Her research focuses on strategic communication in the area of message design for preventative public health campaigns and positive organizational relationships.

In my first year at Salisbury University, I was introduced to the wonderful world of our students, the Eastern Shore’s beautiful landscape and some great opportunities to develop my research. The Faculty Mini-Grant Program provided me and other award recipients with the opportunity to design, implement, and complete our research projects. The call for the University-wide application is rigorous, typically requiring work before and after a regular schedule of classes, student meetings and course preps. However, once awarded the grant, it was great to have a detailed proposal ready when negotiating the processes of implementing the research.

My research interests lie in exploring health promotion behaviors, such as breast cancer detection by middle-class Indian women or undergraduate students in the United States grappling with the health risks posed by the 2009 A/H1N1 influenza virus (both studies were subsequently published – one in a communication and the other in a medical peer-reviewed journal). The Mini-Grant Award allowed me to extend my breast cancer research to migrant women and their negotiation of maternal health practices in urban India by providing support for travel, gathering video-recorded interview data and professional Hindi-to-English transcriptions.

My findings from that summer when I spent 15 days in an urban basti (slum) revealed how rural-urban migrant women negotiate meanings of maternal health practices and how spatially-and individually-inscribed knowledge/power relations sustain macro-societal traditional and biomedical maternal health discourses. Parts of the study have subsequently been presented at the D.C. Health Communication Conference, at the National Communication Association’s annual convention and at one of communication’s premier regional conferences where the research was recognized with a top two health communication research paper award. It is currently under a revise-and-resubmit in a communication journal.

For early career professionals, grant support provides an important resource for articulating their research agenda. Support from the mini-grant has been central to developing my health communication research, whether in my quantitative projects (e.g., explicating indoor tanning intentions for undergraduate females, N=207) or in my qualitative projects (e.g., understanding how relationship support contributes to medication adherence in long-term disease therapy and disability management for multiple sclerosis patients, N=25 in-depth interviews).

In these studies, the funds have made possible large-scale participant recruitment, connecting with difficult-to-reach populations and utilization of data analysis software. I am looking forward to presenting part of the tanning study data at Madison, WI, this spring at a premier regional conference and building upon my study on African-American women’s breast cancer behaviors recently presented at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s (CDC) National Conference on Health Communication, Marketing and Media in Atlanta.

The University-wide Faculty Mini-Grant Program has provided faculty like me with exciting opportunities to balance faculty teaching and advising responsibilities with research support to build a scholarly agenda. Through joining Salisbury University as a new professor to my tenure and promotion process this year, the Mini-Grant Program has been central to productively integrating my twin passions for teaching and scholarship.