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MCC prof honored for work on transportation

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The White House recognized a Manchester Community College professor this week for her efforts in finding ways to gather public opinion on transportation from under-represented populations.

The model developed by Professor Rebecca M. Townsend has college students conduct face-to-face interviews with the most transit-dependent groups, such as youth, low-income, and minority populations.

"What we're were doing is based on the premise of trust and that you are more likely to talk to someone you know rather than someone from a planning agency or someone from the government," Townsend said.

Townsend was recognized as part of President Barack Obama's "Champions of Change" initiative. The program seeks to highlight persons ranging from educators to entrepreneurs and community leaders who are working to "strengthen their communities."

Townsend is an associate professor of communications at the college and over the last several semesters has worked with students in her classes, organizing visits to church groups and senior centers to learn how their transportation needs could be better met.

Students were trained in areas such as public speaking and how to conduct meetings. Transportation experts from the University of Connecticut, Connecticut Transit, and the Capitol Region Council of Governments were also brought in to prepare the students.

In Manchester, students learned that residents want better bus connections within the town; users found the system "Hartford-centric."

Others complained about simpler things, like having to climb over mounds of snow on sidewalks during the winter. People also expressed the desire for more sustainable transportation, such as hybrid-buses.

"Countless participants said they were unheard before," Townsend said of the process.

While not steeped in transportation, Townsend says she is most interested in public participation. She says her parents taught her to be confident while speaking up and to value good discussion and civic practices.

She says her approach is effective because people want to talk to someone who they know is going to respect them.

"Each community has its own way of speaking. If you have a person who is effective at finding ways that other people understand, they will open up and share their stories," Townsend said.

Her work in this area goes back several years.

In 2009, MCC was one of seven organizations awarded a \$77,000 grant from the Federal Transit Administration to develop ways to improve community involvement in transportation planning. Townsend is the MCC director of the group that worked on that initiative, during which students visited 29 organizations.

Over 87 percent of the participants said they had never before contacted the government.

CRCOG was so pleased with the students' work that, Townsend said, "they essentially hired us" to work on the massive regional project known as the "knowledge corridor." In October 2010, CRCOG was awarded a \$2.1 million federal grant to help make the region between Springfield and New

Haven more vibrant through transportation, housing, and other initiatives.

Townsend says it has been gratifying to see the students work so effectively. "They were able to amplify the voices of people who are traditionally under-represented," she said.

"To realize that somebody thought of this work in a way that is on par of the other people that were awarded just blew my mind," Townsend said.

At a ceremony in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday, Townsend met with Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood, along with the 13 others who were recognized.

"Today's champions are leaders in developing and implementing innovative transportation initiatives," LaHood said in a statement. "They are making a difference every day in their local communities and across the country by improving America's transportation infrastructure and helping their friends and neighbors get where they need to go."

Congressman John B. Larson, D-East Hartford, called Townsend's work to increase youth participation in government "vital for the future success of our communities."

"This recognition is yet another example of the great innovators and educators we have in Connecticut's education system, and I look forward to seeing her continued commitment to her students," he added.

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