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## An Interview with David Jolliffe, University of Arkansas

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## An Interview with David Jolliffe, University of Arkansas

### *Veronica House*

Veronica: David, you retired in June 2018 from the Brown Chair of English Literacy at the University of Arkansas. Thank you for doing this interview with me about how to find funding and support for community-engaged projects.

David: Sure.

Veronica: I bet that a bunch of our readers either have community literacy projects that they're working on or are thinking of launching, and they're wondering, how do I fund the work I do, and how do I explain it in ways that make sense to people outside of writing and rhetoric studies?

So to begin, could you tell us a bit about your position, and the role of The Brown Chair within the university and the broader community?

David: Sure. Thirteen years ago, the University of Arkansas called me up and they said, "We've got an endowed chair in literacy. Are you interested?" I said, "What does that mean?" and they said, "Well, we'd like you to come to Arkansas and to define literacy in any way you want to define it, of course it's a big term--and then you have to get to work solving problems."

My first year here, the dean gave me the year off teaching and he said, "I want you to drive around through Arkansas and I want you to get the literacy lay of the land--see where there are issues happening that you could be involved with." And so I took him up on that and I did several driving tours throughout the state. What I discovered, Veronica, is I live currently in Northwest Arkansas, in the lap of luxury. It's not that there are no pressing issues here in Northwest Arkansas to work on, but given the socio-political geography of the state, the issues that involve literacy are much more exigent in other parts of the state, and particularly they are much more exigent in the part of the state that's called the Arkansas Delta. It's the triangle of counties that goes from the North East corner of the state, cuts back in a little bit and then goes back out just South of Helena, Arkansas, so it's literally a 17-county area that's wedged between the Mississippi River on the East and this odd geological feature called Crowley's Ridge on the West.

That region used to be the agricultural bread basket of the state. They used to joke and say the soil is so rich there, you can throw out a pound of nails and harvest a bucket of crowbars. But the same thing happened there that happens in agricultural America, has happened for the past 20 years.

Mechanization is one thing. It used to take 100 people to run a farm; now it takes four.

And globalization: It used to be that the cotton we grew in the Arkansas Delta would be shipped to the textile mills in North Carolina, and the cotton grown in Arkansas has to compete with cotton grown in Singapore and South America.

And then curiously, the interstate was another problem. The interstate came whizzing past these little towns and pulled all the commerce out from those towns, out toward the interstate. But the commerce that grows up around the interstate tends not to be local commerce, but instead tends to be franchises, fast food places, things like that.

So there are counties in the Arkansas Delta that would lose as much as ten percent of their population in a decade, and what evolved, I think, was a three-class social structure, two classes of which have tended to stay in the Delta: there is an older upper-class class that owns property that they would love to sell but there's no one to buy it. And then there are the people at the other end who really don't have much wherewithal to leave and find new work. The group that left the Delta was the historic middle class, and think about the businesses that rely on middle-class support: shops, restaurants, movie theaters, and so on.

So the populations began to dwindle. A friend of mine who lives in the Delta, a school superintendent, referred to it as the "exodus from the Delta," the exodus being to Northwest Arkansas and Memphis, where there are plenty of jobs. Given these demographics, my colleagues here at the University of Arkansas and I wondered what we could do in those counties that would be connected in some way to reading and writing and that would to enrich and enhance and sustain quality of life. I think all of us who work in this field know that the connection between economic prosperity and enhanced literacy is not automatic. We don't want to fall victim to the literacy myth, but there is something to be said for helping people understand that the prosperity of their communities does hinge in some way on their understanding of the roles that reading and writing will play in the 21st century.

So that's what put me to work in that part of the state. I really devoted the first ten years of my time in Arkansas there.

Veronica: That's really an incredible shift that Arkansas has seen. And David, were you coming from Chicago at the time?

David: I sure was.

Veronica: So you come from Chicago, you don't know Arkansas at all, and you have this opportunity to do a driving tour and really get to know the state in a way that probably a lot of academics don't.

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David: That is correct. I was very lucky to have my dean's support, and really lucky also in one other respect: I grew up in a town of 4,000 people in West Virginia, so I know a bit about how small towns work. I had been in a big town for 21 years before I came here, so I was able to tap back into my own experience.

The first project I launched, I called the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project.

Veronica: Could you tell our readers about this project?

David: Students from mostly small, rural high schools in the Delta worked in virtual writing groups led by University of Arkansas student mentors. Both the high school students and the U of A mentors completed oral history projects on topics of their choice, and both groups of students eventually produced final projects in genres of their choice. I had done a similar oral history project when I was teaching in West Virginia in 1976. So I was able to capitalize on my West Virginia roots.

And then, as I think I've mentioned to you in our conversations, I had the really good fortune to meet and get connected with Steve Collier who is the CEO of what is now called ARCare, but at that time was called White River Rural Health Center. When I met Steve, White River had clinics in 23 towns in the Delta, and I think they're up to about 30 towns where they have clinics now. Steve is really visionary. He says, "When I go into a town, I consider myself responsible not only for the physical health of the people but also for the quality of life in the town."

For anything that I wanted to do that would involve community enrichment, community literacy, community reading and writing, Steve has been 100 percent behind me and supported me strongly, even to the point of ARCare buying and renovating an old house in Augusta, Arkansas, ARCare's home base, calling it the ARCare Guest House. He told me any time I was in the Delta and needed a place to stay, "our home is your home, and you're welcome here." So it's turned out to be a real friendly partnership with ARCare and that part of the state.

Veronica: This sounds like a kind of fantasy for people who do community-based work. You say you were fortunate enough to meet Steve. How does that happen, and how do you convince someone like him that writing is something to invest in, to partner with?

David: Well, in the general case or in the particular case, I can answer both of those questions. In the general case, I was able to explain to him that, something that we all know in our field: that smart work in the United States these days tends to be work from shoulders up. No matter what kind of new work you're looking at, you're going to need to have people who are problem solvers, innovative thinkers—people who are able to see these problems and potential innovations that come before them as things

that require what I call “linguaging out”—in other words, situations that involve careful, critical reading and effective writing.

For example, I can think of all of the work that I’ve done with community health, with Steve’s work, people need to understand that that’s essentially a reading issue that they’re at work with. These are people who need to learn how to read care plans, they need to learn how to read their prescriptions, these are medical professionals who need to be able to write plans, to write projections for their patients. These are people who need to be able to write grant proposals, to be able to get up and stand up before civic organizations and present their ideas. So in order to innovate in these small towns that are economically troubled, that innovation always takes place through, or at least is preceded by and usually accompanied by, extensive reading and writing.

So I was able to convince Steve of that from the outset. My explanations fell on very receptive ears. Steve earned a bachelor’s degree in history from Baylor before going off to med school, and he loves the theater and he particularly loves Shakespeare. So here’s an M.D. who is in love with the whole idea of “linguaging” things out. So I did the general explanation, and the particular explanation. But I think it really became useful in my being able to work with Steve and the people in town to say I’m not doing this because I want to write a book, or I’m not doing this because this is something that the University of Arkansas has hired me to do. I’m doing this because we’re working together to try and make this community better. And I think that’s been the most important thing to say: What small steps can we take with this population in the community that would make that part of the community be more at home with reading and writing than they had been before?

Veronica: I see. So when you’re talking to someone like Steve, you’re not talking about the ways in which literacy is a contested term in rhetoric and writing, in the way that you *write* about it, for example. You get very real and practical.

David: Well, by the same token, we don’t just automatically fall into an autonomous view of literacy. I don’t say that we’re going to diagram the sentences and have a vocabulary test. It’s always literacy in context. It’s always what do people need in order to read and write effectively.

Augusta turned out to be my home away from home. I worked with Augusta and then with other communities in about a two-hour radius around it. We discovered very quickly that there were all sorts of caregivers, parents, and grandparents who didn’t have much sense of what it meant to make their homes a literacy-friendly environment for kids before they went off to school. So we ran a series of two community workshops. We initially called them parent workshops, but we discovered they were much more than that. They were parent workshops, grandparent work-

shops, caregiver workshops. There really was a sense, frequently as you see for example in Shirley Brice Heath's work, of the whole community raising these kids.

The community turned out in reckless abundance for these two workshops where we tried to demonstrate, "here's what you can do in your homes to make your homes more literacy friendly." And my sister, who's one of the greatest early literacy specialists, came in and ran both of these workshops. We would give every participant home reading lights for their kids' bedrooms, a basket of books, and a little doll or toy or something like that that would go with the books for the kids.

Veronica: What a wonderful gift!

David: And we were amazed at the number of homes that didn't have a light that parents or grandparents or caregivers could sit under so they could read with their children. And you know what we did, we went out and found a small grant from the Dollar General Foundation for that. It's an organization that I hope people in our field know about. If there's a Dollar General store in your neck of the woods, they give very, very nice grants -- I think the top one was \$15,000 -- But in literacy, Veronica, you can do lots of work with \$15,000.

Veronica: That's a lot of books and reading lights!

David: Yeah, yeah, sure is.

Veronica: What a fun and worthwhile project. Now I'm thinking about all the places in Colorado that could use something like that.

David: Absolutely.

Veronica: Do you have any other projects that you are especially proud of that you've really loved working on that you could talk about?

David: Oh sure. One we decided to do relatively quickly had to do with ACT scores. Depending on what week you look at the data, Arkansas ranks either 49th or 50th in the percentage of adults who have a college degree. I always like to give people the pop quiz: If Arkansas is 49th this week in the percentage of adults who have a college degree, who is 50th? And people always say, "Oh, it's Mississippi." Well, that's actually not correct, it's my native state of West Virginia. And if West Virginia is 49th, Arkansas is 50th, so they go back and forth. But we realized that for many students in the Delta, because of the socio-economics of the schooling system, the students have not had much preparation to do well on the ACT, which is the test that gets you into college in Arkansas. It requires a 19 on the ACT to be admitted to University of Arkansas. We were running into kids who

were valedictorians of their high school and they were getting 17s and 18s on their ACT.

So we went into Augusta High School and set up ACT tutoring sessions. I actually got my graduate students involved in this. We went in and led tutoring sessions in the afternoon. In wealthier communities, parents do this, teachers do this, there are mentoring programs that people can buy into. In poor rural Arkansas, those things did not exist, so we did our very best to help students get into those situations.

We ran a principal's book of the month for all of the elementary schools in one of the counties. The principal designated a book of month that he wanted all of the kids to read, but they did not provide free copies to take home, so we bought free copies with ARCare money, and put a copy in every dentist's and doctor's office in the state for the entire month.

The books were promptly stolen, I was delighted to say. Do you remember the famous book by Abbie Hoffman in the 1970s, *Steal This Book*? My thinking was if someone stole it that meant they're reading it.

One month, very early into going, we were really emphasizing developing home reading abilities, and the local electrical company let us put literacy tips in the utility bills. So when they were sending out the monthly utility bills for about three months, every monthly utility bill had a little section the size of an index card, with a home literacy tip that we stuck in there. So we're just trying to get people more and more involved in reading and writing.

So those are just some little things. Now some larger things also emerged from the ARCare partnership. The ARCare folks decided that part of what young people needed was a bit of cultural capital, so in cooperation with the Brown Chair, ARCare decided to run what they called challenge trips. In three or four high schools located in ARCare communities, students were challenged to read a designated book, interview adults in their town about the issues raised in the book, write an essay based on their reading and the interviews, and do a community service project. If the students did all of those things, they would get an all-expense-paid trip to some place.

So the first year, we took kids to Stratford, Ontario, to see plays at the Stratford Festival. The next year we went to Washington D.C. We went in February and damn near froze. We went to Dallas the next year, and we went to Chicago the year after that. For many of these kids, this is their first trip out of the county where they grew up. So we'd go to these places, we'd go to museums, we'd always see some live theater. We'd get a sense of how do people talk in big cities, we would listen to all kinds of conversations, things like that, and it was an eye-opening experience for many of these kids. And that was again just something that came out of this ARCare collaboration.

One project that's still going on also emerged from my work in the Delta is the project that's called SISTA, for Students Involved in Sustaining Their Arkansas. It used to be called just SISA, but my friend Kassie Misiewicz, said, "Brother, you need a T in their someplace." So I added a "their." SISTA actually emerged from the Arkansas Delta Oral History Project. The Arkansas Delta Oral History Project had kids doing Oral History about some aspect of local legend or lore, and then doing a transcript of an interview of someone, and then writing in the genre of their choice. Historical fiction, academic essay, personal essay, series of poems, whatever.

It was a great project, but its drawback was that it was a little too nostalgic. It was a little too much, "oh those were the good old days." We don't live in the good old days. We live in the present and we aim for the future. So I decided to let it sit dormant for a couple of years, and then I revived it as SISTA. In SISTA, is we recruit students through a program that exists here in Arkansas, and I believe in Texas and Oklahoma as well. It's called EAST, which stands for Education Accelerated by Science and Technology. It's a high school science class and students can actually take it for one of their science credits. But in EAST, students are required to do a community service project, so we recruit students to be SISTA fellows. And to become a SISTA fellow, you have to propose a project that will in some way enhance or sustain the quality of life in your home town, your home region. And if the proposal is accepted, we hook up the SISTA fellows with University of Arkansas mentors one on one and we support them during one full academic year. They don't actually do the project, but they do the research for the project and write a substantial prospectus and a grant proposal for it.

And at the end of the year, they give their completed grant proposals to me and a graduate student, and I work to try to find funding for it to make it happen. But I also am able to give them a small grant, what I call a book scholarship. For completing the proposal they get a little bit of money they can use to buy books in the bookstore when they go to college.

So SISTA really gives students the opportunity to propose a very forward-looking project. The second step in the SISTA proposal calls for an oral history of the proposal's topic. Here's an example: A student in Brinkley High School in the Delta proposed the establishment of a healthy cooking/healthy eating center—she argued that many people in her hometown didn't know how to identify healthy foods or how to cook in ways that didn't involve frying. The second step for her was to actually do an oral history, to interview people who learned to cook and learned to eat over the decades and talk with them about what were the food ways, how did you learn cooking, how did you learn about eating. So there's still an oral history aspect to SISTA, but then the remainder of project essentially says "Okay, what are we going to do in the future about this project?" I'm



hoping that when I retire from the University of Arkansas at the end of this year, someone will take on SISTA and keep it going because it's a wonderful project. A lot of times, SISTA students tell me, "This is the first time I've ever gotten a chance to design my own project", so in the sense that it's their project, they really own it. It's very important.

Veronica: Are you working with teachers as well?

David: Yes I am. Their EAST teachers are their on-site SISTA teachers.

Veronica: I see.

David: When the SISTA fellows visit the university campus, they spend a whole afternoon working on their grant proposal with tutors at the Walton College of Business Communication Center. While the fellows are doing that, I actually sit and work with the teachers. None of them are trained as writing teachers, so we spend an afternoon just talking about what they can do to coach and support their students. In the first year of SISTA, we tried to run the project without the involvement of the on-site EAST teachers, but it just didn't work.

Veronica: It sounds also like you're doing work that could help you connect with other departments at the university. I'm thinking education and nutrition.

David: Absolutely.

Veronica: Are there interdisciplinary projects? And then a follow-up question is: Have you found that your projects have been a way to connect with others on campus and to explain what writing and literacy programs can do?

David: Absolutely, yes. From the very start, because we had students engaging in entrepreneurship and writing grant proposals, folks in our business college have been very interested in working on this project. And here's another example: We had a young man who was a SISTA fellow last year, a brilliant kid from the northeast corner of the state who was concerned about inefficient irrigation among the rice farmers in that part of the state, and for his SISTA project he developed this new smart water plan that he thinks would work.

Well he was going to go to Purdue, and I went to the engineering college and I said, "Come on, we can't let this kid get away. We've got to bring him here." So he's now a student in the engineering college.

Let's see, what else have we done? One SISTA proposal led to the creation of a tourism office in Mississippi County in Northeast Arkansas. The business school helped us work with that as well. There's a shuttered air force base, Eaker, that one of the students proposed converting into a Cold War museum, so I talked with the history folks about that. So yes, so we're

trying to let folks throughout the university know what we're doing, and we're saying, "Come join the fun."

Veronica: One of the things that prompted this interview is the attacks that have happened over the last year or so on academia more broadly, and on some writing programs in particular. My work directing the Writing Initiative for Service and Engagement in the University of Colorado Boulder writing program was targeted.

David: Yes.

Veronica: You live and work in the South. I'm sure you engage with conservative potential donors. Do you notice that people have concern about or are wary of folks in academia, and if so, how do you counter that? How do you help them feel more at ease and understand the importance and scope of what you do?

David: That's a good question, I think that because I'm working largely with kids in their communities, this is not just a University of Arkansas enterprise. We've tried to say to these communities, "We want to learn, but we want you to learn with us-- we all want to learn together." That has helped. And second, this is a bit odd, but I tapped into my old hillbilly roots. I know how these small towns work. My family has lived in the same county in West Virginia since 1831, so I know how deep roots go. When I say to these folks, "you probably already remember what your town used to be like. How would you like to think about doing some improvements so your town is a little more vital and a little more ready for the 21st century?" And they say, "Yeah, we can do that, particularly if it's not going cost us a lot of money. If you're coming in to support us, then we're delighted to work with you."

Plus, you can get a local champion. I can't overemphasize the importance of Joy Lynn Bowen, whom Steve Collier hired as his education specialist. She was on the ARCare payroll but she was my major collaborator. She had been a teacher in Augusta for about 40 years, so everybody knew her. So I had this local representative with me at all times, it wasn't just me coming from the university--it was me accompanied by people that everybody knew already over there.

Veronica: What would you say to people who have smaller offices or fewer resources than you had in the Brown Chair? For our readers who have smaller budgets or zero budget, who are trying to figure out how to promote their work and the effective ways and venues for getting their work out. What would you recommend?

David: Well two things. First of all, there are small grant programs out there that you can go to. I mentioned the Dollar General program for example. Also, while I know some people that don't want to set foot in a Walmart, every

Walmart in the country has \$5,000 to give away to projects. If you walk into a Walmart, look on their front wall and there are their grants: They've given \$1,000 to the volunteer fire department, \$1,000 to another club for some project. If you've got a small project that you think would operate in your community and improve reading and writing, I would have no qualms whatsoever about going into Walmart and saying, "Could you give us \$2,000 for this?"

If you don't need much money, go to the unlikely places. I had no idea that health care would be an area that I would capitalize on. I might go to a local bank and say, "You're a major bank in town, or a local insurance agency." Many, many small rural towns have Farm Bureau insurance agencies. So I might say, "I want to do this project. It will enhance the quality of life in your community, so can you give me a little bit of money?" And then, get on social media and toot your own horn. False modesty is not a virtue in this profession. You need to be able to write your own news stories. If your university or college has a news site, put stories on it as often as you can. I have a graduate student who's my director of SISTA, who, in addition to doing all of the logistics of recruiting the kids and getting them here and working with teachers, is a wonderful writer of feature stories. So every time we have the SISTA kids here, she writes a story, we take some picture, and we send it to the university newsletter. The university newsletter will put it on the university news. Sometimes the local paper will pick it up. Just toot your own horn.

Veronica: Yes, fabulous. David, this is such great advice. Do you have any final words before we sign off?

David: Veronica, I guess just the major thing I emphasize is when you go to the community, let them know what's in it for them. Projects like the ones my office sponsored devoted a great deal of effort toward enhancing the quality of life in people's own regions and home towns. This is not something that just supports the kids at the University of Arkansas.

So that's the emphasis that I would give: Help them know that it's to help their community.

Veronica: Fantastic, thanks so much David.

David: Sure, glad to talk to you Veronica.