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Students involved in campus-community partnerships

Summary: Students have discovered numerous opportunities to work with communities in the west central region by becoming involved in campus-community partnerships facilitated by the Center for Small Towns.

(January 16, 2007)-Students at the University of Minnesota, Morris have discovered numerous opportunities to work with communities in the west central region by becoming involved in campus-community partnerships facilitated by the Center for Small Towns (CST) at UMM. The CST has had great success integrating students into the community. Jessica Beyer, community program Assistant at the CST, coordinates student involvement and also coordinates publicity for CST. “We get students involved and help them get a job with their community.”

Nine UMM students are employed by the Center this academic year, but in any given year, said Beyer, around 70 students will have been employed by CST throughout the academic year and summer. Junior Kim Ukura said, “The Center is a really fantastic place to work. You get some real life application of your research.” Ukura was a student administrative assistant who worked in publicity as well as helped to manage staff meetings and student training.

Jessica Anderson, another student who was employed summer 2005, agreed with Ukura. “I think the Center has a lot of really beneficial programs. They benefit not only Morris, but communities around the state. I think working for CST is a very valuable part of enriching your educational experience.”

CST offers students not only a job, but a chance for some hands-on experience for the field of study in which students are interested. Blair Jasper, a fifth-year senior and double major in English and history, said, “It’s been a great opportunity for me – it’s real campus-community cooperation. CST helps to show how people of all walks of life can get involved with these issues. It’s a great way to apply the skills we learn in the classroom – it lets you get hands-on experience.”

Jasper is involved with the Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC), which is a grant-funded program. The COPC program received a \$400,000 grant for 2006, which will be used for many projects throughout the year. COPC encompasses three main areas: housing, economic developments and community and neighborhood revitalization. Jasper works primarily with the housing project alongside Morris’ Housing Rental Authority (HRA). Last year CST sent out a rental survey to form a consensus for Section VIII housing so that Morris HRA would know where they needed to improve and what to develop in local housing. Section VIII housing is housing available for lower income citizens from apartments to assisted living. The survey, which has not been done in this area since 1970, will provide much-needed and long-overdue information.

Another project funded by the grant and headed by COPC are opportunities for students to work one-on-one with UMM faculty to conduct research that benefits Morris and the surrounding area. Jasper has been working with Assistant Professor of Political Science Greg Thorson on a research project that looks at the rights of tenants and landlords. It evaluates the rights and responsibilities that one has to the other. Jasper has attended meetings dealing with what Jasper calls the “Rural Housing Crisis Project.” This project looks at the epidemic of homelessness in small towns and rural

areas. Thorson has been researching this topic and teaches a class at UMM with a service-learning component that involves students.

Jasper has also been a part of a so-called hot topic in Morris: the old elementary school reuse project. He has attended community meetings to look at different options for reuse of the now-vacated building. “It’s an involved project, but it’s something I’m glad we’re moving in on,” said Jasper.

Although Jasper graduated from UMM in December 2006 he looked back at his work experience with the Center for Small Towns and said, “I have been able to build community relationships and to compare my own rural community with Morris.” Jasper is from Pipestone. While his postgraduate plans are “still up in the air,” Jasper said he’s “exploring every opportunity that comes my way,” from attending law school to entering a graduate program for multicultural studies and social justice to working in communications.

Photo by Judy Korn: Blair Jasper

Through personal and academic discovery, the University of Minnesota, Morris provides opportunities for students to grow intellectually, engage in community, experience environmental stewardship and celebrate diversity. A renewable and sustainable educational experience, Morris prepares graduates for careers, for advanced degrees, for lifelong learning, for work world flexibility in the future, and for global citizenship. Learn more about Morris at morris.umn.edu or call 888-866-3382.