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Service learning at UMM engages students, partners with non campus community

Summary:

(December 10, 2003)-Community is defined as: “sharing, participation, and fellowship.” This definition can be used to explain what the service learning program at the University of Minnesota, Morris hopes to achieve.

According to its web site, service learning is the integration of community service into the curriculum. In a service learning course, faculty, students, and community partners engage in a project that meets community needs and provides students with the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills learned in the course to real-world challenges.

Two such classes have been in progress during the fall semester.

Dr. Andrew Hostetler, assistant professor of psychology, is teaching a course, titled Adulthood Aging and Death. In the first part of the course, students interviewed senior citizens from the community about their life history. This helped students and the community form a social relationship where one may not exist. Then, students and seniors collaborated on two community events, a community dance held in the Morris Area Elementary School gymnasium and a holiday bazaar held in the Morris Senior Center. Hostetler hopes that these will become annual events and that additional events will be eventually added.

Dr. Stephen Gross, assistant professor of history, teaches The History of Religion in America. Each student in the course interviewed two residents of west central Minnesota about how they use religion in the current sociological and political time. Students will then reflect on how individual’s stories about their personal religious practices relate to the changing pattern of religion in west central Minnesota over the last 40 years. Transcripts of the interviews will be available to the public through the West Central Historical Research Center, located in the basement of the Rodney Briggs Library at UMM. Some dialogues about the religious diversity in the area community are planned for next semester. It is hoped that the interviews will spark conversations and a deeper understanding of religious practices in the community.

“[It’s a] perspective of people in pews,” Gross said.

In addition, students in Argie Manolis’ (instructor in English and the Service Learning coordinator) and Stacey Aronson’s (assistant professor of Spanish) classes continue with service learning projects begun in previous years. Manolis’ college writing students plan and implement weekly activities for residents of West Wind Village and collect their stories while writing about social issues related to aging. Aronson’s advanced Spanish students translate documents for area businesses, tutor native Spanish speakers in English, and teach elementary school children basic Spanish conversation skills.

The service-learning program began in fall 2000 with a vision. Faculty could apply for a service-learning grant with the stipulation that they explain how their project identified a community need as well as how the money was to be used. The initial grant money was to last through spring of 2003 at that point discussions for the next step were held.

Thanks to the Corporation for National and Community Service, UMM was able to continue service learning. A second grant, a Learn and Serve America Higher Education grant, was received in July 2003 and begins in spring 2004. This grant will be used to provide funds for deeper student and faculty training in service learning, provide students, community partners, and faculty with more direct input in the program and projects, and help create and sustain a series of ongoing, multi-discipline, multi-course service learning projects in the following four focus areas: youth mentorships, elder partnerships, arts and culture, and regional agriculture.

For more information about funding opportunities available to faculty and community partners, or employment or course opportunities available to students, visit the service learning website: <http://www.mrs.umn.edu/academic/sl/>. In addition, more information about the Corporation for National and Community Service can be found at <http://www.learnandserve.org/resources/index.html>.

The service-learning program is growing as many as eight to 10 courses will be offered in the spring semester. This is good news for the campus and the area as a whole because service learning benefits everyone it especially helps the relationship between the area and the campus. Everyone who participates finds out his or her importance within Morris as well as all of west central Minnesota.

“[People] become more aware of the history of the community and of their roles, rights, and responsibilities as citizens,” said Manolis.

With the continued help of service-learning grants, dedicated students, staff and faculty, as well as the important partnership of area businesses and residents, the service-learning program at UMM has a promising future.

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.