Steans Center Newsletter

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School for New Learning: Promoting Healthy Communities

By Dan Baron

At a time when health care access is one of the most prominent and debated issues, Professor Susan Reed’s “Promoting Healthy Communities” class takes a local approach to promoting health and wellness. The course is offered each fall term through the School for New Learning (SNL), DePaul’s undergraduate and graduate degree programs for adults, and emphasizes a public health perspective by giving students an opportunity to work with a community-based organization in Chicago’s Humboldt Park neighborhood.

Reed notes that students often come to her class with a distinctive background: they are typically working adults, and many also hail from Chicago communities. She says that the course is partly about “developing civic engagement skills in adults.” Marisol Morales, Associate Director of the Steans Center, adds that “the adult student population brings experience, knowledge and resources to this class, as well as an openness about wanting to do this kind of work.”

“To me, it is very important for the university to be engaged with communities,” asserts Reed, who is a member of the SNL Faculty and Associate Dean for Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment. “It also happens that community-based service-learning is a tremendous learning methodology. I believe we can learn more about issues by being actively involved in problem-solving with a community.” Through the class, students work with Greater Humboldt Park Community of Wellness, a coalition of small health promotion groups on the city’s northwest side. Reed works closely with the organization to develop a project well before the ten-week class gets underway. This past fall’s assignment: to put together a resource guide for people who have HIV – a guide that includes information about an array of resources in Humboldt Park. The idea is to get this information in the hands of service providers, who can then give it to their clients. The information will be also available online, and will be presented in both English and Spanish.

In addition to HIV services, the guide will also include information about medical, legal, housing, education and other needs. One early step students took while developing the guide was researching what others have done in this field.
DIRECTOR’S LETTER

“Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.”

Article 25, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948

In an interview about his book *Pathologies of Power*, physician and anthropologist Paul Farmer noted “So I can’t show you how, exactly, health care is a basic human right. But what I can argue is that no one should have to die of a disease that is treatable” (http://www.ucpress.edu/books/pages/9875/9875_auint.php). In cities like Chicago, getting treated or not is often determined by whether information about local health and wellness resources is accessible.

As policymakers debate national healthcare reform, community-based organizations such as the Greater Humboldt Park Community of Wellness are on the ground working to reduce tremendous disparities in illness through improving access to information about health and wellness services in Chicago. Humboldt Park is a racially and ethnically diverse and largely working class neighborhood of Chicago with alarming obesity rates of 35% for adults and 47% for children, both of which are well beyond the city and national averages (Shah and Whitman, 2005; Whitman et al., 2004). Moreover, a 14% rate of Type 2 diabetes among adults and increasingly youth is twice the national rate and almost three times the rate for the city.

As congress ponders about how to resolve a national healthcare crisis, the above figures for Humboldt Park beckon the question: what can neighborhood institutions do to support community health initiatives?

This edition of the Steans Center newsletter focuses on how DePaul’s School for New Learning (SNL) students are supporting local healthcare advocates in Humboldt Park. SNL offers a truly unique approach to education for adult students that considers their existing skills and knowledge and that positions experiential learning as a central teaching methodology. In Professor Susan Reed’s course, students become engaged through service learning to learn about how the local community has mobilized its own assets to begin to address the challenges faced by those with limited access to healthcare resources. In doing so, as you will read, the students reflect on crossing cultural, spatial, class, and racial boundaries that leave them with a new outlook on their role as engaged residents of the city. For some students, the project activates reflections on how they can become advocates for underserved residents in their own communities.

Others dismantle preexisting negative perceptions of a place and its people. In general, students learn about: what it means to collaborate with a community organization that defines the parameters and goals of a service project; how to contribute to asset-building and the strengthening of a resilient community; and the realities of the present-day healthcare crisis through the lens of those who unjustly suffer from diseases that are often treatable.

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Environmental Stewardship Community Internship Launched

This past spring and summer, the Center launched the Environmental Stewardship Community Internship (ESCI) program in partnership with the Gary Comer Youth Center (GCYC) and the Chicago Botanic Garden. The internship provides a unique, hands-on opportunity for DePaul University students to experience community-based environmental stewardship in the context of urban agriculture and youth development. The program includes two ten-week internships with an average commitment of ten hours per week. Each of the two internships is based out of the GCYC in Chicago’s Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood with supplemental training components taking place at the Chicago Botanic Garden. The first intern, anthropology student Cora Marquez, worked alongside GCYC staff and neighborhood youth as they prepared their rooftop farm for the spring and summer harvests. Applications for the 2010 program will be available in February 2010 on the Steans Center website (http://steans.depaul.edu).
Dr. Jacqueline Lazú, Associate Professor of Modern Languages, has been appointed by the Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences as Director of Community Service Studies (CSS). She is also an affiliated faculty member of the African and Black Diaspora Studies Program and the Latin American and Latino Studies Program. Dr. Lazú has introduced a new series of workshops that enrich the CSS curriculum and that welcome the DePaul community and the public to engage in a deeper discussion about the value of community engagement. Once per quarter, CSS will explore key principles of community service studies, including methods of service learning and various levels of community engagement. Dr. Lazú has developed and taught a number of community-based service learning courses including Intermediate Spanish which launched the Intercambio Spanish service learning course series in the Modern Languages Department. She also developed Advanced Spanish for Heritage Language Learners, focusing on issues of Spanish language literacy in Latino communities. In addition to her numerous academic publications, Dr. Lazú is an experienced playwright, director and performance artist. She holds Ph.D. from Stanford University in Spanish with concentrations in Latino Studies, Caribbean Literature and Theater.

Marisol Morales, Associate Director of the Steans Center, has been appointed by Gov. Patrick Quinn to serve on the Latino Family Commission and on the Commission for the Elimination of Poverty. The Latino Family Commission advises the governor and General Assembly and works directly with state agencies to improve and expand existing policies, services, programs and opportunities for Latino families. The Commission on Poverty Elimination is an independent body in Illinois focused on eliminating poverty in the state based on international human rights standards.
DePaul freshman Maria Hamidi spent her first college quarter teaching phrases like “how do you like your food” and words for eating utensils to an adult English as a Second Language learner in Chicago’s West Town neighborhood. Hamidi’s ESL partner, works in a Mexican restaurant and desires to learn words that will help him communicate with customers. Hamidi, who moved from Pakistan to Naperville when she was three-years old, could relate to his struggles of adjustment. But the immigration experience, Hamidi discovered as she created lessons, differs by culture and for every individual.

“Immigration,” Hamidi says, “is often portrayed negatively in the media. Working at Erie House was a way to put a human face on what the media dehumanizes. It’s a way to empathize with individuals, with their stories.”

Hamidi was a student in Professor Patrick Callahan’s “Discover Chicago: International Chicago” course and tutored at Erie Neighborhood House through the Steans Center’s collaboration with the First Year Program. Callahan’s Chicago Quarter course introduced DePaul freshmen to Chicago as a city continuously influenced by global policies and social changes and specifically highlighted how globalization impacts immigrant communities. Students participated in 15 hours of service learning in community organizations such as Refugee and Immigrant Community Services and Vietnamese Association of Illinois in addition to Erie Neighborhood House.

In the fall quarter, DePaul freshmen are required to take a Chicago Quarter course, a class designed to orient first-year students with the city through experiential and group-based learning. Explore classes meet from the start of the school year while Discover courses begin with an immersion week prior to the fall quarter. Chicago Quarter topics range from Cubs baseball and blues music to urban issues such as healthcare and immigrant youth and the diversity of neighborhoods such as Humboldt Park, Bronzeville, and Little Village. The Steans Center supports over twenty Explore and Discover Chicago classes like Callahan’s, offering service-learning as an integral component of the curriculum.

Liezl Alcantara, Steans Center’s Service Learning Course Evaluator and psychology Ph.D student, assisted Callahan with the community-based service learning component including Olympic Day, where students learned how the Games would affect Chicago communities at the ground level. “What’s great about offering service learning to Discover courses is that these students are fresh and open to receive and really make an impact at the very beginning, on the onset of their experience at DePaul,” Alcantara says. “During Immersion Week, students were taught Asset Based Community Development (ABCD), the idea that all communities, regardless of whether they have high crime or poverty rates, have strengths. Students were engaged and primed to ask critical questions.”

Alcantara hopes implementing service learning into the Chicago Quarter will help students discover community engagement as part of their DePaul identity and integrate what they have learned in the community back into the classroom.

Callahan, a political science professor, has been teaching his Discover International Chicago course for three years, and this fall quarter was his first year working with the Steans Center. Before the Chicago Quarter began, Callahan met with Jeffrey Howard, Assistant Director for Faculty and Academic Development, to discuss incorporating service learning into his course. Howard and the Steans Center’s placement team then paired Callahan’s class with community organizations like Erie Neighborhood House that focuses on assisting immigrant communities.
Community
Students learn through experience that Humboldt Park is rich in community-based assets. Early on in the term, students took a tour of Humboldt Park led by Morales, who is herself a resident of the community. Through the tour and their work in the community, students learned about the importance of cultural preservation, the community’s resistance to gentrification and, in general, its proactive response to neighborhood issues.

“I didn’t know what to expect,” says SNL student Maria Gallegos. “The first things you see are the Puerto Rican flags, businesses, then a community organization, a restaurant. Then we saw murals that depict the community, which are pretty amazing. You get the sense that there’s something at stake – people are trying to hold on to what they have.” In the process, faculty and students say the tour and the service learning experience that follows counters negative views that may be held by those less familiar with the community.

The community’s assets also include three hospitals, several low-cost clinics and a myriad of nonprofit agencies as well as after-school programming, food pantries and a satellite branch for one of the City Colleges of Chicago. In addition to its many assets, Humboldt Park faces a range of pressing issues, including health-related challenges identified in two studies of six Chicago communities conducted by the Sinai Urban Health Institute in Chicago. The studies not only asked residents about incidents of diabetes, heart disease or other health problems, but also about their perceptions on health-related matters. What research found, says Juana Ballesteros, Executive Director of the Community of Wellness, “was a startling disproportion of many illnesses in Humboldt Park.” HIV in the Humboldt Park community was identified as one of eight areas the community should make a health priority. Reed suggests that in some ways the experience of residents in Humboldt Park reflects the experience of people in many communities around the country.

“Our country is experiencing a growing gap between rich and poor, and that is reflected in the growing gap in health care for rich and poor,” says Reed. “Humboldt Park has a high rate of uninsured people, and residents tend to work in low-wage jobs where there is no health insurance. There is a tremendous need for people to be covered – and for culturally competent care.” Students in the class learn about these health disparities – and what the community is doing to address them.

Project
The project, both Reed and Ballesteros say, starts with the community, which sets the agenda for this effort. It also emphasizes community-based primary prevention, an approach Ballesteros says is “something we don’t hear enough about.” While readings for the class lead to discussions about mental health, lack of insurance, racial inequities in healthcare access and other topics, development of the resource guide gives students a hands-on understanding of these issues. “It’s important to have easy access to information that is condensed and centralized,” says Ballesteros. “Students are working to centralize information about local HIV services.

The wonderful thing is, there are services in Humboldt Park – but they have never been centralized. The last thing someone with HIV needs when trying to locate housing or get food or access other services is to have a problem finding information.”

Like many service learning classes, this class exposes students to a community and experiences they might not otherwise have. “In a sense, this class is about crossing what some may perceive as a boundary,” says Reed. “But many students are excited, not resistant. They are likely to say ‘OK, I’ll make it work.’” “This class is mutually beneficial,” adds Ballesteros. “I couldn’t produce these materials without students, but there is also this sense that this experience heightens the awareness and understanding of students.” That thought is echoed by many students in the class, most of whom have had little or no experience in the Humboldt Park community. “This is a rewarding experience – it can benefit the community, makes you feel better as a person and I’m getting college credit for it,” says Cathy Puchalski, a senior majoring in communications. “Getting the word out there is key; and this class also applies to my major.”

Students
While students focus on their project for Community of Wellness, they also have an opportunity to examine their experiences by keeping journals and participating in reflection sessions and discussions in which they talk about community engagement and other subjects. SNL student Jeanette Harris praised the team-oriented aspect of the class. “We have really come together, and everyone has brought something to the table,” says Harris, who is an assistant teacher at the Abraham Lincoln Centre, which provides a range of social and educational services on the city’s south side.

“In the past, I have been the type of person who sat back and liked to listen a lot in class. You cannot do that in this class – you must come to the table with your ideas and feedback.”

Students also must be willing to explore a new community on its own terms. “Based on things I’d heard in the news, I was practically scared to go into the area,” adds Harris. “But once I went on a tour and visited the community, I found that people were friendly. I gained an awareness of what is going on around the community, but also learned about how I can find resources and present them through this project.” Harris suggests that there may also be ways to use this information and present it to her community. “I can incorporate what I’ve learned into my job – the place where I work is like a community, and people of all backgrounds bring their kids there.”

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First Year Program Builds Social Awareness through Service

"I could not have had a good experience without face time with Jeff Howard," Callahan says. "Howard’s instruction helped weave service learning into my own objectives for the course."

According to Callahan, service learning helped him become a better teacher. "It stretched the course," Callahan says of adding the service learning component. "I didn’t change anything in my syllabus, so it added to the content. Students seemed to have a very good experience, both learning about immigrant communities and how they came to be in Chicago. Students seemed to acquire a higher degree of empathy."

After the quarter ended, several students like Hamidi expressed interest in continuing to work with their sites or in beginning to work within their own communities. "Service learning," Hamidi says, "is a different experience than seeing facts on a page. It’s a way to understand people. Tutoring at Erie House really helped me learn how globalization affects individuals’ lives differently. Being active in a community offers a different perspective."

School for New Learning: Promoting Healthy Communities

The value of service learning also stood out for Andrea Baldwin. "If you don’t encounter anyone directly, you go by what you’ve heard and read," says Baldwin, who is pursuing a degree at the School for New Learning while working as a project manager for the Chicago Housing Authority. "I’m finding that some of the struggles people face are the same as those people face in my neighborhood on the south side."

Meanwhile, Maria Gallegos says she learned about how to respect the Humboldt Park community through her experience. "We can’t go in and say, ‘here, we’re going to help you’ – you have to go by the guidelines of what they want. My goal in this class is not only to learn, but to make sure the resource guide is exactly the guide they want. At the same time, I love to interact with people – that’s the way I learn," adds Gallegos, who has been active as a volunteer in her own community. "I would do it again and take another service learning class."

Gallegos adds that her experience in this class and others at DePaul has "solidified" her thought that she might consider running a nonprofit organization in her own community. "Why not start where you live?" she asks. "Of course the resource we are doing for this class will be used in Humboldt Park, but maybe it can be a stepping stone for other communities. Learning about this community was encouraging. One of the messages I heard was ‘Maybe we have this problem here, but we are doing something about it. This is our reality.’"