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Steans Center Newsletter

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Since the birth of the internet, it has been taken for granted that organizations rely heavily on websites to inform the public about what they do. For many small, underfunded, nonprofit organizations, meeting these goals can be a major challenge. Many do not have the resources to build or sustain the kind of websites needed to support their work.

DePaul students taking “Software Projects for Community Clients” help fill that gap by working with nonprofit organizations to build, rebuild, or improve their websites. Students benefit from the experience of solving a real-world problem for organizations that are working on critical issues, while nonprofits boost how they use essential communication tools. Students sign-up for two classes – one in the winter quarter and one in the spring. This winter and spring terms forty students are taking the class and are working on a total of eight projects. Along the way, students keep a journal in which they reflect on their experience and ethical issues related to accessing technology.

This year, the course is taught by Terry Steinbach, Associate Professor in the College of Computing and Digital Media (CDM). Steinbach has considerable experience in meeting the technology needs of organizations. For fifteen years, she owned her own information technology consulting company in Chicago where she worked primarily in the financial and private sector. She taught part-time at DePaul – and earned four degrees from the university -- including a Ph.D. in computer science from CDM. After taking the professorship position at DePaul, Steinbach went on a Vincentian Heritage Tour for faculty and staff in France which, she notes “was fantastic – and it strengthened my commitment to service learning.”

**Learning New Skills**

Students in the class, Steinbach says, use software applications that are new to them. “They learn it on their own,” she says. “That fits in with the idea that students should be lifelong learners.” The course doesn’t only require that students learn, develop and apply technical skills to improve an organization’s website, however.
**DIRECTOR’S LETTER**

In the world of academia, the role of technology in society has long been a debated topic. From a privileged standpoint, we at DePaul can argue in multiple directions regarding the value that the digital world contributes to our lives. As we engage with under-resourced community organizations, however, the issue becomes less about theory and ideology, than about the necessity to address the everyday challenges of organizations and the people they serve. DePaul works with close to 300 such organizations in the Chicago area, most of which serve people who struggle to feed their families, attain a decent education, and care for their health and wellbeing. In our engagement with these organizations, the Steans Center seeks to understand how they see technology supporting their work: in what ways can DePaul channel its wealth of technological knowledge and resources toward enhancing the capacity of organizations to be powerful assets to their communities.

This quarter’s newsletter explores the work of the Non-Profit IT Initiative, a partnership between the College of Computing and Digital Media (CDM) and the Steans Center. The partnership has lasted almost as long as the Steans Center itself. The first CDM (formally CTI) course linked to DePaul’s community partners was offered during the Winter term of 2001 by Professor John Rogers and Dr. Troy Harden (now a faculty member at Chicago State University). This course, “Software Products for Community Clients,” was and continues to be offered as a two-course sequence including both technical and sociological components. As this newsletter outlines, the course guides students toward understanding the challenges of small non-profits in Chicago from a technical, social and ethical standpoint. Since the initial course offering in 2001, CDM has offered 37 sections of technology-oriented courses in service to community organizations in Chicago. Most recently, the partnership between CDM and the Steans Center added a website incubator program and a graduate research assistant position; and plans are underway to develop paid, year-long, non-profit IT internships.

Over the years, the support of hundreds of CDM students and their professors such as John Rogers, Terry Steinbach, Daniel Mittleman, John Fisher, and most recently Norma Sutcliffe cannot be overstated. Their work has direct implications for the success of organizations that without such support, for example, would not be able to maintain a presence on the internet (including, and perhaps most importantly, an online fundraising capacity). In turn, students receive a top-rate education that includes a real-life lesson in the technological challenges of organizations. The value of this education cannot be easily quantified. The students’ experiences, as outlined in the article, contribute directly to their ability to enter the IT job market with a more holistic understanding of the role technology can play in addressing the challenges of our society.
Colombia Trip:
Getting Serious about Leisure

Just after Thanksgiving break last fall, DePaul, Dan Hibbler traveled to Cartagena, Colombia for a two-week trip focused on cross-cultural understandings of leisure. Dr. Hibbler is a resident faculty member of the School for New Learning where he undertakes research on the meaning of leisure across groups. He is also the Chief Program Officer for the Chicago Park District.

For the past two years, Dr. Hibbler directed the international service learning program “Colombia: Cultural Implications of Leisure.” The class meets in Chicago before and after the trip and is co-directed by Shannon Downey, Visiting Professor in the School for New Learning. Steans Center Associate Director Marisol Morales assisted in developing the service learning component and traveled with the group, facilitating student reflections and enhancing the partnership with local schools and community partners.

Dr. Hibbler is acutely aware of how leisure is viewed in this country compared to how it is understood in other parts of the world. “Americans are extremely work wise, but not very leisure wise,” says Hibbler, who in his role as Chief Program Officer at the Park District is responsible for its core mission. “When I tell people I am a doctor in leisure, in many places that is admired. Here, some people snicker and laugh.” That, however, has hardly deterred him as he continues to explore the nature of leisure. In Colombia, Dr. Hibbler notes, people engage in and embrace leisure. “They understand the value of familial cohesion and of more vacation days,” he says. “The Colombians are masterful in how they utilize leisure time.”

A central component of the program involves DePaul students teaching economically disadvantaged children through an English-language immersion camp. Students taught children by using leisure engagement as a primary teaching methodology. For example, students played music, sang and played games as they taught English to children. In addition, they researched leisure activities in Cartagena and kept a daily journal, among other academic responsibilities.

Dr. Hibbler points to notes that he has received from students about the Colombia experience. “They say that the experience has helped make them more relaxed and confident, and how much they are enjoying their favorite activities.” One student wrote to faculty member involved in the class that “The last two weeks have allowed me to view people and issues from a different perspective, and I’m already considering other service learning opportunities for my future.”

Meanwhile, Dr. Hibbler is quick to respond to those who might not understand the role of leisure studies in today’s world. He says that leisure is one of the largest revenue-generating industries in the world. At the same time, it has major implications in a range of areas – like personal health. “Our obesity rates in this country are through the roof,” he says. “There are so many preventable diseases that leisure can resolve. How healthy you are has much to do with what you do in your discretionary time.”
Community-based Research Faculty Fellows

Dr. Neil Vincent
An innovative project on domestic abuse issues received a boost in the last year through a community-based research faculty fellowship at DePaul University. The fellowship’s first recipient, Dr. Neil Vincent, Assistant Professor in the Masters in Social Work program, utilized the support in his collaborative project with researchers at Dominican University, the University of St. Francis, and the Center for Domestic Peace (CDP) on Chicago’s west side. CDP is composed of organizations on Chicago’s west side that work with communities to raise awareness about the problem of domestic abuse and challenge the traditional social norms that support it. The project supports the prevention of intimate partner violence and abuse as well as program evaluation of CDP’s direct service, community outreach and education programs. The research is designed to identify factors that participants find are related to their successful completion of a partner intervention program.

Projects can be proposed by any DePaul University faculty member who seeks to conduct research in partnership with community-based organizations and who incorporates undergraduate and/or graduate student research linked to a course curriculum. All projects must in some way aim at improving the quality of life for residents of Chicago and must be driven by the interests of DePaul community partners.

The Steans Center provided Dr. Vincent with an annual stipend, technical support in his work with communityorganizations, and served as a sounding board as he integrated findings into his research methods course and otherwise developed the project. One of the biggest benefits of the fellowship, he says, was the funding of a research assistant who worked with him for ten hours a week over the course of the year. “The research assistant and monetary support we received for this project are both important,” says Dr. Vincent, “and Steans provides excellent technical assistance on how to do community-based research.”

Dr. Nila Ginger Hofman
At a time of economic upheaval in many communities, documenting the working lives of people can be challenging. That is what Dr. Nila Ginger Hofman and Lauren Rzepka, set out to do with the help of a community-based research fellowship funded by a partnership between DePaul’s Women and Gender Research Initiative and the Steans Center. Rzepka is a graduate student in Women’s and Gender Studies at DePaul. Her stipend was funded through generous support to her department by the W. and I. Beck Foundation.

Research for this project was conducted in Chicago’s Humboldt Park community and focused on the lives of working class and middle-class women. The study examined perceptions of the neighborhood and experiences in the world of work.

Dr. Hofman says that with her schedule in the last year, having a research assistant spend time in the community was essential. “The fellowship has enabled me to mentor a graduate student and have her go out into the community, where she could network and form relationships,” says Hofman. “It’s through that process that we found study participants for this project.” Hofman notes that working with Lauren for twenty hours a week made a big difference on this project. “We got things done that I would not have gotten done if she wasn’t helping me.”

In particular, Lauren was instrumental in tutoring for Association House in Chicago, where she was able to find study participants and maintain relationships. “If you just say you want to interview someone in this situation, they will often say no,” says Dr. Hofman. “You have to spend time with them and build relationships.”

The Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning and the Women and Gender Research Initiative of DePaul University work in collaboration to offer faculty community-based research fellowships. All DePaul faculty are eligible to apply. For more information
Building Software Projects with Nonprofits

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It also gives them an opportunity to practice intercommunication skills. “How will they participate on a team? How will they listen?” she asks. “These skills, of course, are very important.” Steinbach says students in this class learn how nonprofits work and the challenges they face. “Generally, the people we work with in nonprofits wear so many hats in their organization. Because their budget goes to services they provide to the community, they don’t have the resources or time to do everything they want to do. They do good work – but it’s often on a shoestring.”

Focus on Improving Websites

Grace Canavan, a senior majoring in information systems, praises the real-world nature of the class – and her professor’s commitment to service learning. “You can tell this professor really cares – she really wants us to learn about things we’ll need to know after we graduate. We have to arrange meetings, work outside the classroom and take things into our own hands. Instead of writing a one-page homework assignment, we work with our client. It’s real experience.” Canavan is project manager for a team that includes four other students. One of her responsibilities is to manage communication between the client and the student team.

Canavan and her team are working with First Defense Legal Aid, which runs a hotline and provides free legal services to anyone when they get arrested. “I am learning that not everything goes as planned,” Canavan says. “It’s a big eye-opener – this group is so busy, doing a million things at once.” Through this organization, attorneys also go to police stations to interview clients – sometimes in the middle of the night.

Students in the class are building a website for First Defense; the website will feature a volunteer database and a database to run analytics about the population the organization is serving. In addition, one of the team’s projects is to address the organization’s need to enhance its search engine optimization. “When someone types a phrase like ‘free attorney,’ you want this group to come up on the list,” says Canavan.

Jessica Schreiber, staff attorney and executive director of First Defense Legal Aid, says that “Right now, we don’t have anyone in the office who handles information technology. To have DePaul students figure it out is such a blessing. A lot of the work we need done is not particularly complicated for someone who is studying it. To us, it’s a monumental task.” Schreiber says that it is “especially important that the organization improve how it quantifies the impact of its services.”

“In order to staff a hotline of one hundred volunteer attorneys,” she adds, “we want to make the website accessible to them. Volunteers can use it to answer questions – and ask them. We also need to make the website more informative for funders. It’s important to provide content on new developments in the organization.”

Ryan Quinn, a senior majoring in interactive media, is project manager with a team of students that is working with St. Joseph Services, an outreach ministry serving families and individuals at risk in Chicago’s Humboldt Park/West Town and Austin communities. He says of the class that “it is real-life experience mixed with service. It’s a start-to-finish experience that has us ready for different experiences in the workplace.”

Rosenberger says he has learned something through this experience that can only result from working with others. “The more communication, the better,” he says. “It’s so important to get a strong understanding of what the organization you are working with is doing.”

Students on these teams also train clients so they are able to make changes to their websites. “When we finish developing the site, we teach their staff how to use it,” says Quinn. Another benefit of the class for nonprofits is that once student complete it, nonprofits can access help from the university. “We are a very small organization, and we were assured that ongoing help would be available,” says Sullivan. “That’s very meaningful to us.”
Steans and CDM jointly fund a graduate assistant to run the technology side of the system. “We don’t just leave the client with the product,” Steinbach says. “If they need a change, we will show them how to make it.”

David Miller, Dean of the College of Computing and Digital Media, says service learning for this kind of course has great potential. “We do, of course, value the educational experience of working in groups and working with real clients. The potential is there for doing a lot more of these classes. The challenge is in finding the right projects for both sides – students and organizations. You want to have a project that delivers a positive impact on the organization.”

“The potential for these classes is enormous,” adds John Rogers, associate professor of computer science. Rogers played a pivotal role in the development of this class and has taught it six times in the last decade. “This is a big city with a lot of community-based organizations that have technical needs,” he says. “Pedagogically, it’s good to expose students to nonprofit information technology.”

Based on the growing interest in these classes, more and more students are responding to the opportunity to be engaged in this kind of experience. “Students have a chance to learn and develop key skills, while also learning about different groups, issues facing our communities, and ways they can help serve,” Steinbach says.

In the end, students have come to appreciate how their projects can make a difference for nonprofits working on pressing social issues – while also making a unique contribution to their own education. Grace Canavan says she believes the class has had important benefits for First Defense and for her as a student. “We will leave them with a website they can edit and that is easy to manage. As for me, it’s a great learning experience.”