

Urban Studies students help area communities with projects

Students in Janet Cherrington-Cuore's Urban and Regional Studies class help area towns solve problems, and get credit for it.

By Robb Murray, Free Press Staff Writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato, MN, 12/19/2006]

MANKATO — Yes, the work they did on the project was required to successfully complete the course, and in the end their transcripts, of course, will still end up with a letter grade.

But for the Minnesota State University and South Central College students who worked on the city of New Prague's parks brochure project, the experience pushed beyond the realm of grade-point average.

Students from MSU's Urban and Regional Studies Institute, together with students from South Central College's graphic arts program, presented their finished work to New Prague's Parks Board recently. It is the result of more than a dozen weeks of research, editing and working together.

"I like the realness of it. It's not just for some fictional group or person. It makes you put more effort into it, I guess," SCC student Kelly Wolle said. "When you work with real projects, you begin to encounter some of those realworld problems that arise."

This undertaking is a fairly unique one. MSU instructor Janet Cherrington-Cuore said she knows of no other higher education institution in the state that avails its urban studies students to municipalities for civic projects.

And New Prague's parks brochure project is just the latest. Previously, Cherrington has struck deals with Janesville and St. Peter, and she's taking offers from other cities as well.

"This is really learning by doing," says Cherrington-Cuore. "They get to learn about media relations, and they get to do this in an applied project. Not only are the students being mentored by graduate students, but we also have a day where they go up to SCC and see how the brochure gets put together."

Says Neil Nurre, graphic arts instructor at South Central College, "When we got the four-color press, we were looking for work to do with other groups."

Cherrington-Cuore says the reason partnerships such as the one with New Prague are so uncommon is because it's hard to plan, execute and finish civic projects in 15 weeks, especially working with students. But the students have risen to the occasion each time.

"It helps a lot having an actual project, working with an actual group of people," says MSU student Kelly Deter. "It made us be more committed to it. This was something people were actually looking forward to."

Cherrington-Cuore says her classes are willing to take just about any project that fits within the parameters of her class. She says it also has to be a doable project within a one-semester time frame — "If we were to have to go out and research everything on our own in one semester, we just couldn't do it," she says.

When they're done, they've got, ideally, a satisfied municipal customer, and something to show a prospective employer.

"They use the finished product and our press releases to put in their professional portfolios," Cherrington-Cuore says. "So that's really helpful."