

# Service-learning continues to grow at Minnesota State Mankato

## National award

**The Service-Learning Program keeps planting seeds and growing, resulting in a national award for Student Leadership Development and Service Learning.**

**By Robb Murray, Free Press Staff Writer [published in The Free Press, Mankato, MN, 3/5/2006]**

MANKATO — She admits the analogy is cheesy. But it's also apt, she says, when describing the evolution of service learning at Minnesota State University.

"We just keep planting seeds," says Kelly Meier, director of MSU's Student Leadership Development and Service Learning department. "People help us fertilize it. And pretty soon you've got a big tree of service learning growing."

That growth has led to Meier's department garnering a national award for the service learning work. MSU announced this week that the Student Leadership office has won the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators "Student Affairs Professionals Best Practices Award."

They'll pick up the hardware at the organization's annual conference in Washington, D.C., next weekend. The service learning program will also be featured in the association's journal and on its Web site.

Service learning at MSU has been evolving for about 12 years, Meier said. It has picked up much steam during the past few years, and was given a big boost recently with the addition of the Campus Kitchens program, where prepared, unused food from residence hall cafeterias is distributed to the area's hungry.

They've also created or chipped in with the New Student Service Project, Make a Difference Day, Earth Day, Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week, National Children's Book Week, Youth Activity Fair, The Sound of Reading literacy project and Dr. Seuss's Birthday/literacy event.

Service learning students have also organized a spring break trip to help relief efforts in hurricane-ravaged New Orleans. Other students have started an apple-collection project to complement the Campus Kitchens project.

"The awards that come are great because they put the program out there," Meier said, "But it doesn't mean we're where we want to be ... Our ideal dream would be that service learning would be at the forefront of everyone's minds."

That's getting better, she said. Most faculty support the idea. But implementing takes time, something many faculty yearn for, and money, something universities never have a surplus of.

Results, though, are quite compelling. Meier says that studies show a 75 percent increase in information retention when students learn by doing, versus learning by lecture. So, Meier says, it's not just about serving the community or feeling good about what they do. It's about better education, the very purpose of the university.

She believes service learning will continue to grow.

"I believe that people at MSU are good people," she said. "You never hear somebody say 'No, I don't want to help you.'"

More information about the program is available at [www.mnsu.edu/slds](http://www.mnsu.edu/slds).