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Rachel Hatch

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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Action Research Center brings learning into community

IWU students earn credit solving real problems.

Two Illinois Wesleyan professors are taking the classroom into the community in an unusual program that is designed to establish and sustain their students' commitment to active citizenship.

James Sikora, professor of sociology, and James Simeone, associate professor of political science, knew their students could pass tests on social policy, but wondered if they truly understood the community's social problems or the not-for-profit organizations that battled them.

"Students need to work as 'savvy followers' to be effective leaders later," said Sikora. "Only then can they work effectively with community partners and their partners' projects."

In response to this need, the two professors created the Action Research Center (ARC), in which students partner with Central Illinois not-for-profit community organizations to develop applied research projects. The Center is uncommon because it goes beyond simply coordinating volunteers. Projects are a part of an Illinois Wesleyan seminar, in which students earn credit toward graduation. By the end of the fall 2004 semester, 30 students will have participated in the seminar, which will be offered annually.

"We appreciate that we have intelligent students who have a social conscience," said Sikora. "We wanted to find a way to bring academic subjects to them that would match that drive."

Sikora and Simeone drafted nine not-for-profit organizations — ranging from Heartland Head Start to Prairie State Legal Services to the Ecology Action Center — to work with students in the seminar as community partners. These partners made presentations about their organizations' goals and objectives to students, who were then matched with a community group and developed projects on which they continued to work throughout the semester.

"We've been blessed with some pretty sophisticated projects," said Sikora. "The organizations came to us and said, 'This will be very time-consuming and emotionally consuming.' I said, 'Bravo!' That's how the real world will be."

"I wanted something more hands-on," said Liz Towers '05, who is a double major in sociology and Hispanic studies. "I find sociology interesting because I want do something I will find meaningful. I knew this seminar would be meaningful as well."



Professors Jim Simeone, above left, and Jim Sikora came up with the idea for the Action Research Center as a way to channel students' drive for social change with academic learning. (Photo by Marc Featherly)



Above, from left, Bridget Mudron '05 and Liz Towers '05 meet with Joni Scritchlow, family/community content leader at Heartland Head Start. The students created a brochure to help non-English-speaking parents of Head Start children. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Through the seminar, Towers spent the fall semester working with Heartland Head Start, which assists low-income families with preschool-aged children. “We work with about 350 children a year,” said Debra O’Connell, who is Head Start’s child health and development content leader. “The non-English speaking population of those children is growing. We wanted students who could help coordinate the needs of Spanish-speaking clients.”

Towers and her partner, Bridget Mudron '05, assisted by creating a brochure, in Spanish, for non-English speaking parents of Heartland Head Start children. The brochure provides information about Bloomington/Normal community resources that might be of assistance to those parents.

“I know it’s a lot to do in a semester,” said Towers, “but I’ll get more from it than I would taking a test or writing a paper.” Towers said she may remain in the community after graduation to continue her work.

“The students are put in situations where they really have to think for themselves,” said Simeone. “They learn how to run meetings and take minutes. They learn how to write a grant. They learn how to lead from behind.”

The hands-on approach is key to the Action Research Center. First offered during the second semester in 2004, ARC was not the first attempt by Sikora and Simeone to connect students with community issues. For years, each had helped community organizations with short-term projects and worked together to match students to internship possibilities.

“It was around 1996 that we first identified participation in community activities as important to our students,” said Simeone. Both professors attempted to coordinate projects with students and community organizations within their own department. “Boy, was it difficult,” Simeone recalled. “There was so much outreach that needed to be done with the students. I realized this needed to be a University program.” Many departments were interested, said Simeone, who then teamed up with Sikora to integrate community-based action research into the curriculum.

It was Sikora who first proposed creating the seminar as an ongoing program. Through ARC, students work on a one-semester seminar, an internship, or an independent study project. Uncompleted or continuing projects can be passed along to future students. “We wanted something long-term, that would go beyond one semester or an internship,” Sikora explained.

Even though it is only two semesters old, Simeone thinks Sikora has discovered a formula for success. “Jim Sikora is really the genius behind this program,” said Simeone. “He found a way to satisfy the department while slowly evolving a University program and making it sustainable social science.”

Finding the not-for-profit organizations to work with students was never a problem. Through years of work with not-for-profits, Simeone and Sikora built contacts within the local not-for-profit community. “People like Karen Zangerly of PATH and I already knew each other,” said Sikora. “We went to lunch with [people from] organizations and asked them to be partners in the program.” Other groups soon followed.

Heartland Head Start had a different Illinois Wesleyan contact. “[IWU history professor] Paul Bushnell is one of the members of our board of directors,” said O’Connell. “He has always been an advocate for us.” Bushnell suggested Head Start to “the two Jims,” as O’Connell calls Sikora and Simeone. “They asked us to bring three ideas to lunch, three priorities,” she said.

At the start of each semester, Sikora and Simeone work to find the best match of students to organizations. Each not-for-profit makes a presentation to the class. “Some do more formal Power Point slides, while others just come in and talk,” said Sikora, adding, “It becomes a lesson in the different managerial styles as well as informational.” Students create resumes with the help of Simeone and Sikora, and “submit” them to the organizations that interest them. “Some people put in resumes to four or five of the nine groups, which was great,” said Sikora. Once they are selected, the students meet with the organizations’ leaders to develop projects.

Head Start works with two different Illinois Wesleyan student groups, one on the ESL resources brochure, and another to create a database. Of this latter project, O’Connell explains: “I have to identify 100 different indicators three times a year for each of the 350 children in Head Start. That’s shelves and shelves and shelves of information. I need a way to organize that so I can present it for our funding requirements.”

While she appreciates the extra help that IWU students provide, O’Connell realizes that working with them is about more than just getting able assistance. “We have a group of kids here who could be our future leaders, of the country and of their communities. This heightens their awareness about people in poverty and how groups like Head Start are trying to help.”

As students work within such organizations, Sikora hopes they will find that community involvement is not simply acts of kindness, but something more.

“I hope students in the seminar will feel empowered. They will realize they don’t have to be white knights riding in to save the day. They will learn to work with the community partners, and learn about themselves in the process.” — *Rachel Hatch*



In their work with ARC, Maren Wesley '06 and Liz Jaroscak '06 (above) documented the seven-hour, two block journey of an 1894 Queen Anne-style house. Weighing an estimated 180 tons, the structure was moved in November by the Old House Society (OHS) , which helps restore and preserve historic homes in Bloomington. Wesley and Jaroscak helped OHS with pre-publicity and photographed and videotaped the move, collaborating with cable TV’s History Channel. (Photo by Marc Featherly)