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Students Explore Collaborations with City, County

February 11, 2010

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – Two Illinois Wesleyan University classes are taking advantage of a wealth of information from local sources in Bloomington, and returning the favor by providing new insights on the data – all part of a collaboration with the city the University calls home.

A ‘real-life translation experience’

“I really wanted my students to get into the local community,” said Associate Professor of German and Eastern European Studies Sonja Fritzsche. In her German 488: Von Demokratie zur Diktatur (From Democracy to Dictatorship) class students are introduced to the concept of German immigration by translating old, German-language newspapers from the Bloomington-Normal area that are housed at the McLean County Museum of History’s archives.

The German people represented the largest immigrant group to Illinois in the later half of the 19th century, said Bill Kemp, the librarian/archivist of the museum, who offers Fritzsche’s students an overview of German-American history in the area and artifacts in the museum. “In the 1870s, McLean County was home to a thriving German community, with 1 in 10 Bloomington residents born in Germany,” said Kemp. Bloomington also housed two German-speaking schools and two churches holding services in German, along with several German newspapers.

“It is so important that my students learn how German-speaking people have shaped not only U.S. and Illinois history, but also the history of Bloomington-Normal,” said Fritzsche, who has students translate advertisements and passages from one of the three German-speaking newspapers that existed in Bloomington. “This is particularly challenging for the students, because all of these papers are printed in the old, German Fraktur script, a type of Gothic typeface,” said Fritzsche. Calling the class “a good real-life translation experience for the students,” she noted the translated advertisements are now part of the archives and have been used by current residents in research.

“I hope our translations will be a useful resource for non-German-speakers interested in these newspapers,” said Grace Kelmer, a sophomore music education major with a German minor. “People come into the museum to look up ancestors, but if the only mention is in German, it is not much help.”

‘Can anyone make sense of these numbers?’

For Associate Professor of Economics Diego Mendez-Carbajo, the idea of using real data from the City of Bloomington for his new class titled Economics 370: Time Series Analysis was more than a good way to study financial and economic variables.

“Quantitative analysis skills are one of the comparative advantages that business and economics majors bring to the job market,” said Mendez-Carbajo, who noted students who take the class

should be able to look at a long series of observations and discern the patterns. “I wanted students to learn about the data-gathering process itself. At the very least I would like them to be the one person that steps forward when their future boss or supervisor asks ‘can anybody make sense of these numbers?’”

Mendez-Carbajo said he knew he wanted to use local data when he began developing the class a year ago. “Local data makes the topics immediately relevant,” he said of the nine years of sales tax receipts the City of Bloomington’s Finance Office supplied. “For a macroeconomist using recent data is the best way to ensure that your work is relevant to your peers and to the rest of the world.”

Students in the class will be running tests and replicating all the modeling techniques discussed in class on data of tax revenue flows, mortgages, foreclosures, subordinations, leases and state-tax liens. “We can detect long-term trends, cyclical fluctuations and seasonal variation in that amount of data,” said Mendez-Carbajo, who plans on submitting results of the data analysis to the John Wesley Powell Research Conference this spring. “We also have an open-ended invitation from the city to show-and-tell whatever we find,” he said.

The analysis provided to the city may assist in offering new perspectives on cost-cutting measures, according to Tim Ervin, finance director for the City of Bloomington. “Many local governments, such as the City of Bloomington, have faced – and will continue to face – the challenges to provide services to its residents in the face of lower revenue,” said Ervin. “This challenge has led local governments to reassess the type of services it provides, as well as other cost-saving actions. The students in Professor Diego Mendez class have the ability to not only enhance their own knowledge of local economic data from real world data, but the opportunity to provide their analysis and a fresh perspective to local officials.”

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