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Published February 18th, 2008

SMC Interns Gain Meaning from Community Experience

By *Sophie Braccini*



A work session at Moraga Parks and Rec, left to right: Kim Burrowes, Lindsey Parker, Jay Ingram, Kimberley Nelson Photo Sophie Braccini

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching recognized Saint Mary's College last December as a leader in incorporating community engagement into the academic curriculum.

According to Marshall Welch, the Director of the Catholic Institute for Lasallian Social Action (CILSA) at Saint Mary's, the many examples of students' contributions are a testimony to how the faith-based liberal arts philosophy of engaging and challenging students provides life-changing learning experiences while serving the community.

Recently, Moraga Parks and Recreation Director Jay Ingram contacted kinesiology professor Andrea Eagleman to propose a sports marketing internship for her students.

"We really needed help for the marketing of our Treeline Triathlon on April 25th," explains Ingram. "Working with Saint Mary's seniors who are specializing in sports marketing was a perfect match."

Saint Mary's senior Lindsey Parker is leading the sports internship team. "They gave me the whole responsibility of marketing the event and finding volunteers for the race," explains a confident Parker. "It was a bit overwhelming, but exhilarating."

Parker is contacting all the sports clubs, swimming pools, schools and stores in the area that might have members interested in participating in the event, while classmate Alex Plain is working with all the middle and high schools.

Feeling empowered, Parker proposed new strategies including the creation of a Facebook event to promote the race. "This is education," she explains. "We are practicing what we learned in the classroom and we'll have a real impact on the event."

Although exhilarated by the experience, Parker feels greater on-the-job pressure working on this project than she does at school.

"Bad work at school means a bad grade; bad work here means that people will be disappointed, the event won't be as successful, and that would be harder to face," she says. In addition to this one event, she is establishing a time-line that

can be used for subsequent races in the future.

Welch and others at CILSA also work with chemistry professor Steve Bachofer to establish internships for his students. They are currently involved with the mapping and assessment of the Las Trampas Creek that borders the campus for the Contra Costa County Watershed Program.

"This is a great way to get your hands dirty, use interesting tools such as GPS and GIS, and contribute concretely to the preservation and enhancement of our environment," Welch says.

This is what he calls "Head, Heart and Hands" - engaging the whole student. This real-world experience corresponds to the high expectations Welch is setting for the students that work with the community.

Among the many programs that won Saint Mary's the Carnegie recognition is the Bonner Leaders Program where 15 students take on a project for one year. One of them is E.J. Youngblood, a student from San Jose who, since high school, has been concerned with the problem of hunger in our neighborhoods. When the opportunity presented itself, he undertook the challenge of organizing the College's first 'Hunger-Banquet.'

He is also planning a "Hunger-Run" for spring 2009 where he plans to enlist Lamorinda community participation. "Everyone comes to run around the campus, and donate food or money for the cause," he explains. "It's a way to show that you care about hunger."

Affected by his work, Youngblood has reflected on the causes of hunger. "It's about power, control and money," he says.

"The grading process is part of the reflection," Welch explains. While the community becomes the beneficiary of these programs and activities, the students receive grades for their work, with Welch proposing innovative ways to evaluate the interns' performance.

"It can be done by the usual journal or paper, but it is important as well to measure the effect on the student, the change in behavior," Welch says. "This can be done through the arts, discussions or in class activities."

In the end, what counts for Welch in the pure Lasallian tradition is how students build meaning through the intern experience.

"When students take on a task they ask three questions: What? So what? And now what?" says Welch. "They reflect on what they learn, what they take away from it, and why it matters."

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