

CampusNotes

SIUE EUE class assists Spanish speakers in the area

A Southern Illinois University Edwardsville service-learning project made possible through Excellence in Undergraduate Education (EUE) funding allowed students to help the area's Spanish-speaking population during the fall semester.

A total of 14 students from a Spanish course spent their time in the Fairmont City Public Library, Casa de la Salud, St. Francis Cabrini, Our Lady of Guadalupe School, Kingdom House, Youth in Need and Grace Settlement, and U.S. Legal Solutions. Students engaged in tutoring the area's Spanish-speaking youth, translating for Spanish-speaking parents during parent-teacher conferences at schools, and providing members of the community with assistance in gaining access to health and preventive care, and legal options.

"This started as a need to expose students learning Spanish to the resources in Illinois and Missouri," said Dr. Carolina Rocha, associate professor and Spanish study abroad advisor for the SIUE Department of Foreign Languages and Literature. The department is housed in the College of Arts and Sciences.

"As many students cannot travel abroad to be immersed in a Spanish-speaking milieu, this experiential class was an opportunity to learn from the Spanish-speaking members of our community," Rocha said.

"In addition, students develop citizenship skills by learning from the local needs. Setting up community partners was a very time-intensive task, because it involved contacting many organizations and identifying needs in which students could help."

Rocha noted the EUE funds from SIUE allowed establishment of critical partnerships. She worked closely with Sara Laux, assistant director of civic engagement from the SIUE Kimmel Student Involvement Center, and Lisa Thompson-Gibson from the Office of Student Affairs.

"The students who volunteered at Fairmont Public Library were surprised to learn that in a community where 30 percent of its members live below the poverty line, internet providers are not available, so the library is the place where children have access to the internet."

Students, who worked at the U.S. Legal Solutions law firm, translated documents and called clients. Pharmacy student Matthew Ehrhardt worked at Casa de la Salud educating individuals about healthy eating.

Each student took part in a poster presentation highlighting their experiences in the community.

"This type of experiential learning allows students to take content taught in the classroom outside the university and bring the issues affecting the community to the classroom, as they reflect and problem-solve about them," said Rocha.

"From the beginning, I urged students to relate their volunteering to their own career goals. But it was in their final reflections that it became evident how much they have benefitted from their service, not only improving their language skills, but also developing meaningful ties with the communities.

"For those students who worked with young children, saying goodbye was hard and emotional. Many of the SIUE students promised to return even though the class came to an end. For some others, this was their first experience as volunteers, but one that prompted other service learning experiences."

Rocha said an example was the SIUE Hispanic Association organizing College Ya!, a fair to reach out to Hispanic families. Many of her students volunteered their free time to serve as interpreters for SIUE.