Higher Education

Active Citizenship Expands Horizons for Undergraduates

Kean, WPU Students Make a Difference in the Community

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SPECIAL TO HIGHER EDUCATION

By mission and design, Kean and William Paterson universities are making it clear: there's more to education than rigorous academics.

Active citizenship is among the priorities at these bustling New Jersey institutions of higher learning.

The study of active citizenship, through which individuals strive to make the world a better place and acquire skills to do so, is part of the curriculum and programming at both schools. The lessons to be learned are presented through coursework and volunteer opportunities in the context of healthcare, democracy, government, disaster relief, environmental issues, anti-hunger efforts and other important community concerns where they can make a difference.

A MATTER OF MISSION

William Paterson's involvement is firmly rooted in the school's responsibilities as a public institution, said university president Kathleen M. Waldron, PhD.

"Giving back is part of the ethos of a public university," the emphasis on community and civic engagement was heightened a few years ago, when the school initiated a related three-credit core requirement. Students elect a faculty-approved course that provides an introduction to active citizenship.

Active citizenship by college students benefits more than the community, said Dr. Waldron. "The opportunity and variety of experiences allow the students to find something they can be passionate about." Students take away insights, knowledge, and valuable personal and professional skills. Volunteering can be transformative, sometimes helping participants select a major and, ultimately, a career, an excellent result for individuals once unsure about a field of study. "About 30 percent come in undecided," said the educator.

Volunteering helps individuals find their place in society, said Dr. Waldron, and affords a primer in citizenship, as in the case of a voter registration drive targeting students, part of the American Democracy Project. Voter rolls were increased by 3,000. It was no small task. Some students were not even aware that registration was a pre-requisite for voting, she noted.

Kean has instituted a similar first-year requirement, the seminar "Transition to Kean." Freshmen participate in a volunteer project of their choosing and write a one-page reflective paper on their experience. After that, "there are different levels of involvement," said Scott K. Snowden, Jr., MPA, director of Kean's Center for Leadership and Service. Still, enthusiasm for volunteering is high at Kean, which counted 18,000 volunteer hours in 2012, one of the years the school was named to the President's Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll.

"Every one of our volunteer opportunities fills up to capacity," said Snowden.

REAL WORLD SKILLS

Students acquire a variety of skills that will make them better workers and enhance their leadership abilities, including the art of consensus building. It isn't always easy to get things done as a volunteer leader, students soon learn. "You just can't tell people what to do," said Snowden. "The whole goal of whatever we do [at the center] is really about leadership, and we use service as the vehicle to demonstrate those leadership abilities." Also, prospective employers value volunteer experience.

"These skills can be just as important as those for paid positions."

PAYING IT FORWARD

William Paterson offers a wide range of community and civic projects. Students have participated in numerous projects over the years at Paterson's Father English Community Center. In 2013, they organized the Pioneers Give Thanks campaign, which brought in more than 5,000 food and toiletry items and $1,800. Student involvement extends beyond the school's neighboring towns. For example, students have worked on Superstorm Sandy relief efforts at the Jersey Shore.

The school supports the Hamilton Partnership for Paterson, through which Dr. Waldron gives her time as a board trustee working to achieve goals that will make treasures like the Great Falls more vibrant and accessible. Students provide essential clean-up services at the recently designated Paterson National Historical Park, an especially significant contribution since there is no funding for paid workers, she said. These and other opportunities bring to life the depth and breadth of active citizenship.

THE CULTURE OF ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP

This March, Snowden and other center staffers accompanied 26 Kean students on a five-day trip to Atlantic City during Alternate Spring Break, where they worked in conjunction with the non-profit group A Future with Hope. The group took on key jobs, from installing wallboard to painting at houses damaged by Sandy. Healthcare on the table, too. Kean has been recognized more than once for its response to calls for blood donations by New Jersey Blood Services. The center runs all university blood drives.

In addition to the many service activities gathered under the umbrella of Kean's Center for Leadership and Service, there are numerous projects by other entities, including faculty and sports teams. Members of the football team and their coaches recently visited a local fifth grade during Kean's "Week of Respect." when they spoke about the importance of teamwork, respect and working together. Professor Norma Sowe, PhD, is just one faculty member who directs volunteer projects. Students distribute sandwiches in Newark once a week as part of Operation PEJ, just one of the popular socially aware efforts Dr. Sowe has led over the years.

LEARNING FOR LIFE

In a rapidly evolving world for which the future - including the job market - can hardly be predicted, active citizenship is central to an education that will have lasting value for college graduates, said Dr. Waldron. To that end, William Paterson is offering young women and men "skills that will sustain them for the 40 years ahead."

PHOTOS COURTESY OF WILLIAM PATERNON UNIVERSITY

Making an IMPACT in their community, William Paterson students like Shayna Jones and Sara Naqvi, left, and above clean up trash and debris at the Great Falls in Paterson.