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Service is on the syllabus

By Shawn Boburg
Staff Writer

It's printed clearly on the syllabus so college students know exactly what they're in for when they walk into Mary McHugh's class the first day.

Community service-learning required.

In McHugh's political science class at Merrimack College, that could mean serving soup to the homeless to get a different perspective on the welfare system. In a business class, students might teach senior citizens to get on the Internet as a way of better understanding how to market technology to that age group. Computer programming majors might learn a new language while building a Web site for a public school.

Whatever the case, McHugh says, it means a better education and a better community. And she's not alone.

As they prepare for the start of another year, professors at colleges locally and across the county are fusing so-called service-learning requirements into their curricula. It's not a novel idea, but it's more common on college campuses.

"Experiential learning is a trend in higher education," McHugh said. "There's a lot more of a bridge between learning and community service than ever before."

A national survey released last month shows that 11 percent of college professors made community service a required part of class in 2002. That number has risen steadily over the last four years.

"It's certainly a growing practice," said Josh C. Sterns, Policy and Communications Associate at Campus Compact, the nonprofit that conducted the survey of 504 colleges and universities.

"In the '80s, higher education focused on the consumerist idea that students were being churned out for a work force," Sterns said. "That has shifted somewhat as we've seen communities faltering."

The economic downturn has businesses and public agencies starving for an extra set of college hands, he said. And the string of corporate scandals and low rates of civic participation among young people have also helped spur the need for service in education.

But it's more than just volunteerism.

Educators say dispatching students into the community provides practical applications to theories and abstract ideas—an experience unavailable through long, droning lectures.

"I incorporated it based on what I saw as a need for students in my business ethics class to learn in a little more concrete way," said Gina Vega, a Merrimack business professor. "We spend a lot

of time on theory and applications. This is taking the learning in a course and improving students' ability to respond to it in a meaningful way," she said.

Vega said that within two years every student graduating with a business degree will be required to have a service-learning experience. Next year, she will require students in one of her classes to start up a viable business that picks up old furniture from nursing homes and assisted living complexes, transporting it to local homeless shelters.

"I don't think this is a hula-hoop educational fad," Vega said. "I think it's something that's been missing from higher education in a formal way."

Last year at Merrimack College, 200 students took part in some type of service-learning during the spring of 2003, with 25 professors integrating it into the curriculum. Those numbers are "staggering," McHugh said, considering that in spring of 1999 there were only 75 students and 8 professors engaged in service-learning.

"It's the whole learn-by-doing adage," said Rose Dittmer, assistant dean of the Career Development Center at Northern Essex Community College. "It's been increasing every year...By doing work in the field, you're getting that tangible work experience and helping someone at the same time."

It gives students a taste of different career fields too.

Wendy Luzon, 31, a graduate of Northern Essex, volunteered at a battered-women's shelter, The Women's Resource Center in Lawrence, two years ago as part of a class requirement.

Now she works there.

"You go to class and you write notes and you try to think about the situation, but it's never the same as seeing the real issues of these women. Here you see the behaviors and the issues they are facing, and you begin to understand the system."

"Somebody telling you, 'This is domestic violence, blah, blah, blah.'" Her voice trailed off. "It's just not the same when you really see it.

"It opened my eyes to the problem we're facing and I got more involved in the community," she said.

Still, convincing professors to add service to the syllabus isn't always easy.

"It's always a challenge," said Merrimack President Richard J. Santagati. "Professors understand the level of knowledge they have to impart to the students. Now they have to take another step and incorporate an application. That's a lot of extra work.

"But we're absolutely convinced it broadens the scope of understanding and observation of the society students will live and learn in," he said.