

Bringing Theory to Practice: Community-Based Learning in Psychology

Dr. Sinno and her Advanced Developmental Psychology Lab students were approached by and have partnered with South Mountain Middle School and the United Way to investigate the issue of Family Engagement within a designated Community School. The goal of this research project is to develop measures as well as collect and analyze data from a representative sample of middle school students, family members, teachers and administrators to aid South Mountain in increasing family engagement and community connectedness as effectively as possible. This partnership has provided Muhlenberg students with the opportunity to utilize their foundation in social science as they participate in community-directed action research.

Dr. Scuitto and the students in his Child Psychopathology class create a bi-weekly newsletter to distribute to each of the community partners where students are completing their service learning work. The goal of the project is to improve communication between students and community partners about what is going on in the class. For each newsletter, Dr. Scuitto writes a brief essay that provides our community partners with a brief “snapshot” of what we are doing in class (e.g., content, discussion topics, assignments). Pairs of students prepare a brief essay (250 - 500 words) pertaining to some concept or issue covered in our class. The goal of this essay is to provide a common language for students and community partners to discuss their work together. In each newsletter, we also include a few internet resources that community partners might find useful.

Students in Dr. Haring’s Health Psychology course are applying course material and using their research skills to conduct a variety of community health projects. Students are currently working on projects 1) to research local health statistics to support the Neighborhood Health Center’s application for federal funding for low-income clinics, 2) to design, implement and evaluate community interventions to address childhood obesity in collaboration with the Allentown Health Bureau and St Luke’s Community Health Program, 3) to conduct oral histories of the life experiences of clients of Arcadia Hospice, and 4) to survey Muhlenberg student perceptions of the Health Center website and programming and develop recommendations for revisions. Participation in this work provides students direct experience with public health agencies and gives them the opportunity to apply their knowledge and skills to support community services.

In Spring 2010, students in Dr. Bips' Psychology of Women class were partnered with women from Phoebe Home. The students spent time getting to know their partners by visiting them at Phoebe, going to the Allentown Farmer's Market, and hosting them at Muhlenberg. The goal of the service learning was not only to provide companionship to the Phoebe women but also to allow the students to understand the psychological development of real elder women. The students interviewed the women about their lives - careers, children, marriages, and aging. Students also stated that ultimately they also learned more about themselves and their life paths as women.