Biology Professor Gives Academic Service—Learning a New Twist

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“I had two misconceptions,” says Biology Professor Laura Schramm, Ph.D. “I assumed Academic Service-Learning (AS-L) could only be incorporated into social science courses and that it meant working in soup kitchens and volunteering in homeless shelters. But I was wrong. It ultimately means giving back to the community and finding your own personal way to do so.”

Dr. Schramm recently incorporated AS-L into her curriculum after discovering that out of 24 students in her fall semester Molecular Cell Biology (MCB) course only one person had participated in an AS-L course. In order to get students into the community and blend classroom applications with real experiences she had to get them involved.

The MCB students volunteered with St. John’s University’s Gear Up program as well as the Chinese-American Planning Council (CPC), an organization that provides Head Start and youth programs to school-age children for families in need of aftercare services. The students taught third- to fifth-graders and high school students about the structure of cells and DNA and developed lesson plans, quizzes and activities.

“They did an excellent job, I was so impressed,” says the Biology Professor. “They discovered the importance of civic engagement, academic challenge, time management, assessment, communication and organizational skills as well as professional scientific writing.”

Not Just Genes

These biology majors employed a creative twist in teaching small children the mysteries of science. Whether it’s using licorice and marshmallows to build the structure of DNA or showing them how DNA can be isolated using a standard household product such as dish soap. The St. John’s students combined theories from their science course and related it to children at the Chinese Planning Council.

Summing up her involvement in the AS-L project, junior Christine Jarjies says that “this experience reminded me that science is universal and regardless of your background it is relevant to all people. I provided hope to the students who were interested in the science or healthcare field. It was academically challenging not only for us but also for the high school students we helped.”

“The whole process has been a good experience and has allowed me to grow as a person while I gain teaching experience,” says Sona Augustine, a junior in the Biological Sciences department. “Teaching biology to small kids...
who are unfamiliar with the subject enhanced my communication skills. AS-L gave me the opportunity to learn beyond the classroom.”

Dr. Schramm has high hopes for her students as they move forward in their education and consider different avenues in their professional career.

“I hope the students learned from this experience,” she explains. “During my years of teaching, I’ve come across those students who can take complex scientific topics and explain them in such basic terms. You know they should be in front of a room—as educators.”

VISA

Academic Service-Learning enhances the educational experience of St. John’s students and is a major component of the University’s 2009-2013 Strategic Plan. It’s also a part of the Vincentian Institute for Social Action (VISA), which was launched by the University to more visibly embed St. John’s Catholic and Vincentian mission into the educational experience of its students. VISA provides an organizational focus for a variety of new and ongoing programs through which faculty and students can work together to explore the causes of and develop solutions for poverty and social injustice throughout the world.