Criminal Justice Students Glean Real-World Experience while Involved in Academic Service Learning

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Mary Noe, Esq., has a long list of achievements in her career but when asked what she is most proud of, her reply is simple: Academic Service Learning projects.

"It's just a life-altering experience for my students," says the Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice and Legal Studies. "Honestly, I forgot what it was like when I went to law school and just studied cases, then the magical feeling of entering a courtroom and practicing what you have learned. It makes you appreciate the potential impact you have on people’s lives."

Professor Noe incorporated Academic Service-Learning (AS-L), a classroom-based program that involves students in some form of required community service activity, into the curriculum of her popular Immigration Law course and uses that activity as a means of understanding course concepts. Students not only obtain hands-on experience but also reflect on their experiences during the semester.

"I incorporate AS-L in my curriculum every semester," says Professor Noe. "I have to say that service-learning provides a part of education that I could never duplicate in the classroom. When these students see real people who can't afford legal representation, it inspires them to action."

Students in Immigration Law support clients at Catholic migration offices, debt clinics, domestic violence centers and other community agencies that are poorly-funded and in need of legal aid volunteers. They draft court documents and case affidavits as well as assist attorneys during interviews and litigation.

After three years of incorporating AS-L into her curriculum, Noe says she now understands the significance of this course on students’ academic careers. The AS-L curriculum gives students an advantage and prepares them for future litigation.

With the overwhelming number of students participating, priority goes to graduating seniors.

"As far as I’m concerned this is the best thing I can do for my students," says the Criminal Justice Professor. "I can be a great teacher, get them to learn, read and understand but you must have a passion for the law; otherwise, it’s just words on a paper, just another class or grade."

She also understands that whether due to life obligations or physical handicap, not all students are able to attend the on-site AS-L project. To ensure all students participate, she collaborated with the Office of Academic Service-Learning to provide an online platform to connect St. John’s students with a Brooklyn high school. Throughout the semester her students will critique six-to-eight high school essays and offer writing assistance to high school students who otherwise would not receive one-on-one attention.

According to Professor Noe, many students continue to serve at community sites after the semester has ended—and without credit. The dedication and compassion shown on the part of students illustrates the mission of St. John’s.

Service Becomes a Way of Life

Akash Pal, a St. John’s undergraduate has volunteered at Queens County Volunteer Lawyers Project since
November 2008.

“I completed my AS-L hours last November but continued to go every week,” says Pal. “The experience provides me with a sense of motivation to continue in my volunteer work and help the needy in society. I now know it is my desire to become a lawyer.”

“I’m so proud of these students and I’m proud that they’re St. John’s students,” says Professor Noe. “By going out in the community doing this type of work—and we now have a reputation—we are the University’s face. It’s as simple as that.”

Academic Service Learning is one of the components of St. John’s newly launched Vincentian Institute for Social Action (VISA). VISA was launched by the University to more visibly embed St. John’s Catholic and Vincentian mission into the educational experience of its students. It 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. Rev. James J. Maher, C.M. serves as Executive Director of the VISA program at St. John’s.