Eastern on President Obama's Community Service Honor Roll

Posted by Dwight Bachman on March 25, 2013 11:57 AM

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Willimantic, CT - Eastern Connecticut State University has been honored by the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS) and the U.S. Department of Education as one of the nation's colleges and universities that are leading the way in bettering their communities through community service and service learning.

Eastern was one of 609 institutions of higher learning acknowledged on President Obama's "Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll" earlier this month, recognized for their work in serving local communities through volunteer programs and other activities.

"Community service has been a hallmark at Eastern since our earliest days in the 1890s as the Willimantic State Normal School," said Eastern President Elsa Núñez. "Today, our Center for Community Engagement works closely with our faculty to ensure that the service that our students perform in local communities aligns with their academic programs. In providing thousands of hours a year of service to dozens of social agencies and nonprofits, Eastern students are demonstrating their social responsibility while learning valuable professional and organizational skills.

To be recognized by President Obama as a university that exemplifies such service is something that everyone on our campus should be proud of." To better coordinate student service projects in the community, Eastern's Center for Community Engagement (CCE) was launched in September 2009. A full-time director, assistant director, a shared administrative assistant, an AmeriCorps VISTA member and a part-time university assistant staff the center. The center also provides leadership opportunities through federal work-study employment for students.
Eastern's commitment to service is exemplified by the comprehensive volunteer efforts in area schools by Eastern students. Programs to assist schools with student academic performance, behavior and motivation are widespread and effective in all six schools in the district, as well as in local preschool programs. From 2008-09 to 2011-12 Eastern's Center for Early Childhood Education partnered with two area early learning centers to address early literacy. Over the three-year period ending in the 2011-12 academic year, the project improved the language and early literacy skills of nearly 600 preschool-aged children by providing professional development and literacy coaching to 50 teachers and staff. Thirty-nine Eastern students were involved in this project through academic coursework.

Eastern students are also engaged in local schools outside of the classroom. Four hundred and forty-nine students volunteered 5,180 hours in long-term volunteering programs in Windham schools through the CCE and student clubs. Including students who participated in academic service-learning, more than 1,000 students contributed more than 60,000 volunteer hours in area schools. Students in the Business Administration Department provide database and website services to area nonprofits, assisting them in providing more effective services. Nonprofits also benefit from students engaged in the Community Grant Service Corps, supported by the Office of Academic Affairs. Students learn how to assist nonprofits with grant research, through use of the University's "Work Hub," an on-campus worksite dedicated to community-campus collaborations. In all, students provided more than 100,000 hours of service to the local community in 2011-12.

The Puentes al Futuro/Bridges to the Future Mentoring Program demonstrates Eastern's commitment to community service. English Language Learners (ELL) in the Windham Public Schools struggle with assimilation into the school community both socially and academically. The Puentes al Futuro Program assisted ELL students at Windham Middle School (WMS) by integrating in-school tutoring and mentoring with afterschool and summer academic and cultural enrichment with the goal of encouraging students to excel academically and to attend college. The program is a collaborative effort between the Center for Community Engagement (CCE), WMS teachers, family liaisons, and afterschool program staff. WMS students have developed positive mentoring
relationships with Eastern volunteers who have committed to continuing their mentoring relationship with the students as they transition to high school.

Students in the program showed very positive gains in math comprehension, from a mean of 17.8 on the pre-tests to a mean of 54.2 following the instruction. Comprehension remained high at the end of the six-week program, with a mean of 48.7. Students' language arts skills improved as they wrote poetry and performed before families. The project was supported by FWS, AmeriCorps VISTA and a state education grant.

The Collegiate Health Service Corps (CHSC) is a program coordinated by the Center for Community Engagement with a community partner, Eastern Area Health Education Center. The CHSC's mission is to expose undergraduate students to health careers through service learning experiences that promote culturally competent health and disease prevention education to medically underserved communities. Student volunteers participate in three program phases of 25 hours each.

In the past year, nine students contributed 234 hours of service at three elementary schools and one after-school program at a community center in Windham, CT, during the academic year. Students conducted a needs assessment to identify nutrition, public health and wellness topics of interest to the children in each of the programs. They then developed lesson plans with weekly objectives and site-specific activities; 80 lessons were provided at the four sites. Subject areas included nutrition, bullying, staying physically active, hygiene, emergency preparedness and stress and behavior management. Students also worked with a local community garden. Program coordinators at the 4 sites expressed great satisfaction with the program, indicating that the children learned a great deal and the program helped address critical public health issues in the Windham community, which has the highest obesity rate in the state. The AmeriCorps program supported this program.
Eastern's "Day of Giving," held on the day before Thanksgiving each year, has become one of the University's most highly acclaimed traditions. For six years in a row, more than 450 needy individuals and families have been served a Thanksgiving meal in the University's dining hall. This is a collaborative effort between students, faculty, administrators, contractors and service providers in the community to ensure that people who might otherwise go without a Thanksgiving meal are served with dignity and respect. More than 100 volunteers from across the campus, including student servers and staff from the University's food service provider, come together to cook, serve, clean up and provide transportation for anyone in the local community who would like to attend. In addition to the Thanksgiving meal, students work with local grocery stores to gather canned goods -- more than 5,000 items were delivered to soup kitchens and food pantries this past year.

In all, Eastern students, faculty and staff donate more than 106,000 hours of time annually to local communities, a value of $2.3 million annually. "Congratulations to Eastern Connecticut State University," said Wendy Spencer, CEO of CNCS. "Through its work, institutions of higher education are helping improve their local communities and create a new generation of leaders by challenging students to go beyond the traditional college experience and solve local challenges."

The CNCS oversees the Honor Roll in collaboration with the U.S. Departments of Education and Housing and Urban Development, Campus Compact and the American Council on Education. Honorees are chosen based on a series of selection factors, including the scope and innovation of service projects, the extent to which service-learning is embedded in the curriculum, the school's commitment to long-term campus-community partnerships, and measurable community outcomes as a result of the service.