

Student volunteers help others and themselves

by Vanessa Virbitsky - Thursday, January 17, 2008

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From losing weight to improving one's grade point average, the start of a new year often brings the promise of noble deeds, and what is nobler than volunteering one's time?

Reaching out to the community is something that the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh and its students take very seriously.

"Volunteer opportunities serve as a nice complement to any liberal arts education," said Justin Reuter, a UW Oshkosh student and leadership development specialist for the Department of Residence Life. "The more students that get involved in this community, the more seriously this campus and students in general will be taken."

According to Reuter and other leadership development specialists in the Department of Residence Life, volunteering provides personal growth opportunities in the areas of academic achievement, community responsibility, professionalism, group dynamics and character development.

Teaching students to value volunteer work is of such importance to Residence Life that each community advisor and program assistant in the 11 dormitories on campus must develop at least one community service project per semester.

"We think of each hall as a community," Reuter said. "These service projects help to extend this small-scale community into the city of Oshkosh and beyond. We also believe that this requirement helps to develop more socially responsible global citizens."

Several academic departments at UW Oshkosh also have recognized the individual and community benefits of volunteering and have made volunteer hours a requirement for program entry. Majors that require student volunteer hours include human services, nursing, pre-professional health programs and social work.

Students in action

Melissa Mader, a student volunteer and president of the campus Student Social Work Association (SSWA), has been experiencing the benefits of volunteering since she was a teenager.

"The feeling after you volunteer is indescribable," Mader said. "It's so fulfilling knowing that you can impact someone's life — whether that impact is small or big."

Mader began volunteering when she was 13 in her hometown parish and currently volunteers her time setting up events for the SSWA.

“Volunteering truly is your chance to reach out to your community and campus,” Mader said. “I firmly believe that volunteer work makes students well-rounded.”

Vicki Moen, the volunteer coordinator at Mercy Medical Center in Oshkosh, has been helping UW Oshkosh student volunteers since 1998.

“You don’t necessarily need to have an interest in health care to volunteer at Mercy,” Moen said. “But an interest in helping others is mandatory.”

Starting the new year with this interest in mind are 36 UW Oshkosh students who give their time to 14 different departments at Mercy. Volunteer positions include working in the emergency and operating rooms, sub-acute unit, gift shop, information desk, ministry, shampoo services, and weekend reception, as well as helping with behavioral health, errands, physical therapy and transport.

“There are a lot of different opportunities available that can fit with student schedules,” Moen said. “It’s also a good opportunity for students to apply classroom skills and explore if this is what they want to do after they graduate.”

Weekend and evening hours are available at Mercy, as well as at many other volunteer organizations in Oshkosh, including Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Fox Valley Region, Boys and Girls Club, Habitat for Humanity and the Salvation Army.