

Testing the Waters

by Grace Lim - Tuesday, November 02, 2010

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/6780/testing-the-waters/>

To the casual eye, Linsi Whitman is wading in thigh-deep waters at Sunset Beach in Sturgeon Bay. But what the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh student is actually doing is playing detective.

This past summer, Whitman and three other students combed 34 beaches in Door and Kewaunee counties to uncover what may be lurking in the waters.

Whitman is not at all squeamish about what she may find. "I really like bacteria," says Whitman, who is majoring in medical technology. "I like learning what is the cause of the bacteria, why is it in the water, why it's higher in certain beaches than others."

The Sturgeon Bay site is one of five laboratories in which UW Oshkosh students are hired as interns to collect and analyze water quality in 10 counties. The findings are then reported to county health officials and the Environmental Protection Agency. This beach monitoring program is part of a large Environmental Microbiology Collaboration, headed by Drs. Colleen McDermott and Greg Kleinheinz of UW Oshkosh. Both have been long-time faculty members in the Department of Biology and Microbiology and are associate deans in the College of Letters and Science.

Students hired to sample the beach water are required to get their hands dirty, or in this case, dirty and wet. "We are growing our own crop of scientists here," McDermott says. "My goal for them is to have them have a great research experience."

What the students do on the beaches and in the labs have great ramifications, McDermott says. "It's not play data, it's real data that's going to affect citizens around Wisconsin," she says, adding, "they are going to be the ones who are saying the beach is open or closed. It's real-life work that has importance."

The hands-on experience gives students a fresh perspective in their studies, Kleinheinz says. "They get laboratory experience. They get field experience. They get to figure out and develop critical thinking skills because things are never cut and dried like they are in a textbook," he says. "There is no substitute for actual real-world experience no matter how many labs or lectures you have in an academic setting."

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