UMD Diversity Initiative Funding

Action Plan 6: Integrate cultural diversity, cultural competence, and social justice into the curriculum

Final Report

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Dept/College: HPER, CEHSP

Project Dates: Spring Semester 2012 (project planning and implementation during February –April 2012)

Project Title:
East Hillside Patch Literacy Beds: Integrating Social and Environmental Justice into EnEd 4555 Foundations of Environmental Education

One Paragraph Summary for Web Posting:
The project sought to integrate cultural diversity and social justice into the EnEd 4555 Foundations of Environmental Education curriculum through a partnership with East Hillside Patch’s Mind 2 Mind After-School Program. East Hillside Patch is a non-profit organization in Duluth dedicated to helping low-income residents organize themselves to create and carry out action projects aimed at enhancing community wellbeing and achieving social justice. The Mind 2 Mind After-School Program aims to promote positive growth and academic achievement, celebrate diversity, and convey the importance of contributing to your community through arts, nature, and community action projects. Students in EnEd 4555 worked with youth and their families to create Literacy Beds, an environmental education method used by the Appalachian Sustainable Agriculture Project, where a garden bed is created based on the information in a certain piece of children’s literature (hence the name “literacy beds,” stemming from a children’s book – “literacy” and garden plot – “bed”). Children “grow” their book by creating a garden bed based on the plants, characters, and plot line of the book. Through this project, youth and families had the opportunity to grow in their environmental knowledge and interest and reading skills through environmental education lessons, the literacy bed project, and family events. EnEd 4555 students had an opportunity to advance their own awareness, understandings, and skills relating to culture, social justice, and diversity through project-based civic engagement with a local community organization.

Assessment of Project Outcomes
The overarching goal for this project was to integrate cultural diversity and social and environmental justice into the Recreation-Outdoor Education Major through EnEd 4555 in a meaningful and transformative way, thereby contributing to the campus goal of advancing equity, diversity, and social justice and at the same time increasing the visibility of the University’s commitments to social justice and contributing to the public good through student engagement in local community issues. While it will take more than one semester to accomplish this, I believe we are headed in the right direction. Specifically these were the desired outcomes:

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• EnEd 4555 students will recognize the value of intentionally reaching diverse audiences through EE programming, as well as recognize the alignment of diversity and social and environmental justice with overarching aims of environmental education and education for sustainability
• EnEd 4555 students will have the knowledge, skills, and motivation for continued collaborative involvement in projects aimed toward fostering community well-being and social and environmental justice.

Assessment of these outcomes was through observation of students’ teaching and interaction with Mind2Mind participants, scored using a checklist/feedback form by myself and the Mind2Mind program coordinator, and students’ lesson plans, which in part were scored based on their appropriateness to the audience/participants of Mind2Mind program and on the lessons inclusion of themes relating to social/environmental justice and community well-being. Thus, this allowed me to gauge students’ general knowledge and skill relating to collaborative work with diverse audiences and fostering community well-being. Their recognition of the value of and motivation toward doing so, and how this connects with their future work as outdoor and environmental educators, was varied. Measured through written reflections and in-class discussion, some appear more motivated then others. I was surprised by the range of reactions, for example, when East Hillside Patch presented their social justice training, as not all students were receptive to this idea (and some reacting strongly against the idea of environmental racism). However, as one student pointed out later on, she was glad that this project was a part of this class, as it was “the first time I heard my classmates express opinions and actually think critically about something,” and that in many of our other classes, she hadn’t had the opportunity to think about these issues or to hear opinions expressed. Thus, this seems to be an additional outcome, and something important for our undergraduate faculty team to consider as we move forward in integrating social and environmental justice into the curriculum.