

ASU project will study community

By ANGELA SHAFFER, Special to the Standard-Times

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Angelo State University's relationship with its host community is about to move to the next level - the city will become the subject of a program of study at the university.

One of the changes that came to ASU because of the Texas Tech merger was the addition last year of a social work program to the Sociology and Psychology Department. With the new program came the Community Development Initiative, a 10-year program to study and promote social improvement in San Angelo.

The first two years of the initiative will be used to develop a community social health index, or what Dr. Kenneth Stewart calls "taking the temperature of San Angelo." The 16 areas of study include acquiring information on levels of poverty, the medically uninsured, pay data and the affordability of housing.

"This information will help in determining whether the community is making progress or not," Stewart said. "It will be helpful for various people in sorting out priorities."

Overall, Stewart hopes students and faculty involved in the initiative will be able to oversee 10 projects, all aimed at bridging the gap between ASU and San Angelo. ASU President Joe Rallo said that when the Community Development team approached him with the idea, he was immediately in favor of it.

"I think this is a great idea, and I fully support the project," Rallo said. "It's a great tool to develop an ASU-community link, will drill down poverty and will increase productivity for many people in San Angelo."

Starting in spring 2009, the social work program will offer a service-learning course. A significant part of the course's grade will be determined by how much time students spend on community development programs. Some of the students in that course will work on the Community Development Initiative with graduate students who are gaining research experience through the program.

Rallo said that the experience students will gain combined with the benefit to the community "has a great purpose." He favors the lengthy 10-year period in which to accomplish many goals.

"This project has a great timeline," Rallo said. "I feel that it will ultimately be beneficial to both San Angelo community members and ASU's faculty and students. It has the potential to help many people in many ways, and I believe that it will."

Another project involved using social sciences to identify candidates for a hard science program. Getting a university's hard science and social science departments to agree or cooperate on anything is a difficult proposition, but ASU is not a typical university, and its faculty members are friendly - the West Texas way. The project represents ASU's cooperative spirit.

Stewart was working with J. Kelly McCoy and Connie Russell of the Biology Department to procure funds from the National Science Foundation to fund what Stewart calls a "science boot camp" to be hosted at ASU. Although the million-dollar NSF grant proposal was denied for this year, McCoy said he is not dissuaded.

"We are still in the process of reviewing our original grant proposal," McCoy said. "We will be in contact with an NSF representative to determine what areas of the grant need work, and there are several other grants that we will apply for to assist us in fulfilling our goals."

Though there is no guarantee any of the grants will be funded, McCoy and Stewart are optimistic. If funded, the boot camp will serve to inspire young people to pursue an education and career in the hard sciences.

Stewart said that the hard science and social science departments hope to spark interest in the sciences among young people by offering the boot camp, which will be a week to two-week science-intensive program specifically aimed at teenagers in and around San Angelo.

"If everything works out, the social sciences will work to identify financially needy students who also have a proclivity for science," he said. "Initially, we'll work through SAISD to find candidates and then spread out to include students within the entire Region 15 area."

SAISD superintendent Carol Ann Bonds said she's happy about the prospect of potentially having a science-oriented camp that will benefit local teens.

"It's still in the making, but I'm excited about the possibility of working with ASU faculty on this project," she said. "Anything to encourage our children to further their education is something I will fully support."

The "boot camp" offered would include an all-expenses-paid summer science experience at ASU. Stewart said that ideally, between 50 and 100 students will "eat, breathe and live science 24 hours a day" each summer for five years. If the program is then proven successful in retaining students to the hard sciences, additional funding will be sought to continue the program.

Ultimately, this collaborative effort is just the tip of the iceberg. Stewart hopes that it will be the beginning of many progressive opportunities for San Angeloans.

"Over the next two years, we'll have solidified ideas for new programs with which to help the community," he said. "It's a pretty big plate, but we're ready to fill it."



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