

CDI program seeks to improve community

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A new program is now on campus, due in part to a \$42,130 ASU Faculty Innovation Grant given to the Department of Psychology, Sociology and Social Work.

The program, Community Development Initiatives, or CDI, launched as a way to improve the community and the quality of life for its citizens. It originated through the efforts of Dr. Kenneth Stewart, professor of sociology, and Dr. Joel Carr, assistant professor of social work and sociology.

CDI work began in fall 2007 with an in-depth community assessment called the Index of Social Health, which looks at challenges in the community and, based on research, informs people of what is working and what needs to be fixed. After the research is completed, CDI members will present the information to community leaders.

"Our goal is to do things like this research project, learn about the challenges in the community by means of that process and stimulate progress and innovation in the community over 10 years," Stewart said.

The index will look at the past of San Angelo, Texas and the U.S. as a whole and compare that data to present day research, using the numbers as a benchmark to see how San Angelo is doing and to allow community leaders to pinpoint problem areas such as violent crime, drug abuse or any unsuccessful programs in the area.

"I think it's really good," research assistant Shawn Shoemaker said. "A lot of cities don't have something to compare these social issues to. It gives an idea to community leaders."

Because of ASU's status as a university, it cannot run programs in the community Stewart said. But this program can use students, faculty and research capabilities to help community leaders develop new approaches to problems within the area.

"We would use our faculty and students, especially in our department but in others as well, to link the university to the community," Stewart said.

Also in the works for CDI is a partnership with the biology department to help recruit students for a five-year project named the Angelo Science Partnership for Undergraduate Recruitment, Retention and Success, or SPURRS.

SPURRS's goal is to recruit talented students from the San Angelo area into a special science "boot camp." This program would help guide students toward graduation and a successful career in science.

"The transition between high school and college is difficult," Associate Professor of Biology Connie Russell said. "It comes as a shock to them and they don't have the right mindset. We prepare them for the workload and help them live up to their potential."

Russell said the program would provide mentors and study groups for these recruited students, which creates an opportunity for current students at ASU to help others and to make a little money.

"The payoff is in the first year because if they do well they can become a mentor next year, which is a paid position," she said.

SPURRS is not a definite program at this time. The department applied for a grant under the National Science Foundation called the Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics Talent Expansion Program grant, but according to Russell, the grant is very competitive.

"The timing of it [SPURRS] depends on federal funding which we applied for" Russell said. "I think we've got a good grant. I'm very optimistic."

If the grant is awarded to the biology department, CDI will help recruit students through the Hidden Talent Assessment System. Members of the CDI would test recruited students through social and psychological evaluations that cover their aptitude, interests, personality, attitude and social interests. It essentially serves as a screening tool for students interested or selected for the science boot camp.

"Some students are not thinking of pursuing physical science or attending college," Carr said. "We identify hidden talents and help track them into physical science as a career option or just at ASU."

If through the screening process it is revealed that the student is better served in other areas, CDI members will help steer them toward those interest areas.

"It [SPURRS] falls in with Dr. Rallo's program of first year experience and improves retention," Russell said. "It gives them a better start in the beginning and gets them on the right foot."