Q & A with Keri DeSutter

Q. Could you please provide some basic information, your name, department, courses taught that have a service-learning component, how many years teaching at MSUM)

 A. Name: Keri DeSutter

Department: School of Teaching and Learning, Special Education

 Courses taught with ASL component: SPED 225: Individuals with Exceptionalities (don’t currently teach, but assist with coordinating the service learning component), SPED 402: Characteristics: Mild Disabilities

 Years teaching at MSUM: I am completing my 7th year.

Q. What is your background in service-learning (mention any courses you have taken as a student that has a SL component, research done, etc.)

1. I was not familiar with the term Academic Service Learning until I started teaching at MSUM. However, throughout my education and career, I have consistently tried to engage in volunteer work to the extent that my schedule allows. When I started teaching SPED 225, Individuals with Exceptionalities at MSUM there was an opportunity to grow and expand a volunteer component of the course. I no longer regularly teach the course, but I have stayed involved in the course through making sure the service learning project remains as one of the key learning opportunities in the course. Every semester a graduate student and I are now involved with placing over 60 undergraduate students at over a dozen community agencies. When the special education program started developing new coursework for a new license, I decided to also incorporate a service learning component into one of the new courses, SPED 402.

Q. Why do you continue to incorporate service-learning into some (or all) of your courses?

1. I chose to incorporate service-learning in SPED 402 because it gives students an opportunity to understand children and families outside of a school setting. Service learning also supports the university learning outcomes.

Q. What do you think are the major benefits for students by having them participate in service-learning?

1. MSUM students studying to become teachers have many opportunities to work with children in schools. However, this perspective may be limiting and may not always allow our students to truly understand the lived experiences of children outside of school. In special education, we learn about the many risk factors that children face that may contribute to a special education label. We also place a significant amount of emphasis on working with families. Experiences outside of the school setting help future teachers better understand the children and families they will be serving.

Q. What do (one or two) of your service-learning projects look like? (Explain the course it is linked to and what part of the curriculum you believe the students would learn best through their service experience, hours of service, expectations you have for the students i.e., reflective journals or final reflective essay or other)

1. Both the SPED 225 and SPED 402 service learning projects require students to complete 10 hours of service at one of many community agencies serving individuals with disabilities and/or diverse backgrounds within the community. For SPED 225 students are then required to write a reflective essay discussing their experience and how their experiences will influence their future interactions. In SPED 402, the students participate in a discussion related to factors such as socio-economic status, non-English speaking parents, and housing environments and their potential relationship to school performance. The service learning aspect of the class moves this topic beyond a point of discussion to real-life. Students in SPED 402 are also required to respond to a series of questions that guide them to reflect upon the course content in relationship to their service-learning experience.

Q. What is some advice for someone who is considering adding service-learning into their courses?

A. Depending on the size of your class and the project you want to complete, one piece of advice I have is to pre-plan. In regards to SPED 225, pre-planning requires that every semester agencies are contacted to ensure we have enough placements for students. We keep the service learning component of the course as an option for students because of the number of students who take the course every semester (about 200). One semester we placed around 90 students and it took many hours to make contacts with agencies to arrange spots for all of our students. It is important to be respectful of community agencies and the work that they do, so for that course we assign students placements after determining how many volunteers the agency may want to work with each semester. This takes a lot of time to match agency and student schedules and needs to be considered if anyone is thinking of implementing a service learning project on a large scale.

Another aspect of pre-planning includes what you want students to get out of the experience in relationship to your course. The service learning project should be matched to a learning objective so students can connect what they are doing in the community to what they are learning in class. Establishing a purpose for doing the service is important to students and will help them gain meaning from the experience.