Q & A with Dr. Nandita Bezbaruah

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: Dr. Nandita Bezbaruah

Department: Social Work

Courses taught with SL component: SW 250: Social Welfare and Social Work course, COMH 315: Health Agencies and Services, COMH 301: Women and Children Health

Years teaching at MSUM: 4 Years

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.)

A. I started incorporating service learning component in several of my courses since 2010. Currently, students have to complete fifteen hours of service learning in Introduction to Social Welfare and Social Work course (SW 250). This is one of the prerequisite courses to apply for the Social Work program. I feel service learning gives students an experience and exposure to various human service agencies, which is so vital in Social work and related fields. I never had the opportunity to experience service learning as a student. But I had read literature and research that supports service learning. I am interested to know the students perception about service learning and I plan to do pre and post survey about the experience. Council for Social Work Education (CSWE) supports service learning as a means to prepare students to practice with individuals, families, groups, organization and communities. Scholarships and stipends are awarded to encourage students to participate in service learning. One such scholarship is the Ashley Brooks-Danso Memorial Fund’s Student Travel Scholarship where students receive $500 for travel expenses and complimentary registration to attend CSWE Annual Program Meeting.

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

A. There are several reasons and benefits for incorporating service learning component in the courses. Firstly, service learning can create a connection between classroom learning and the real world. It takes learning outside the four walls of the classroom. The students have to write a paper where the students have to discuss how their service learning experience benefitted them and the organization as well as how it is related to the course. I feel that learning becomes more beneficial when students are able to observe and experience some of the concepts discussed in class. Secondly, it gives an opportunity to the students to learn about the different organization working in different areas and issues. Thirdly, service learning can be quite useful for networking and building relationships and contacts. Fourthly, students and faculty can explore possible internship opportunities through service learning. In Social work program, students have to complete 12 credits of internship and service learning can be a good opportunity for students to think about internships opportunities. Fifthly, it also benefits the organizations where students do their service learning. The organizations are able to utilize the services of students to do projects and meet the various needs of community organizations. Sixthly, it inculcates in students a spirit of civic responsibility and giving back to the community. Some of the students were involved in volunteering activities at the high school and service learning provides them opportunity to continue doing so at the undergraduate level. Some students continue volunteering even after the completion of the service learning hours.

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

A. Service learning benefits students in several ways. It helps to develop communication and interpersonal skills among students. In most cases, students have to make initial contact, setting up time schedules and be familiar with expectations and programs. During the course of the service learning, students may have the opportunity not only to interact with the personnel within the organization, but also with clients. This helps to develop interpersonal skills. Students may also have the opportunity to work on projects as a group. These experiences help students to develop their knowledge base, connect classroom leaning to real life skills. It can inculcate in students spirit of civic responsibility which is so vital. Service learning also provides opportunities for students for networking, developing contacts and exploring internship and employment opportunities.

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)

A. This semester, I am incorporating service learning component in my SW 250 course (Introduction to Social Welfare and Social Work course). I plan to have 5-6 projects for service learning. I contacted several organizations in and around the Fargo-Moorhead area and mutually decided on these projects. One of such projects will be working with FM Coalition for Homeless Persons. In SW 250, we discuss in much depth about issues related to poverty and homelessness. Students will be involved in the Community Connect project. The project focusses on those who are homeless and at risk. Through this project students will identify and try to connect the people with different resources such as housing, food, healthcare etc. Before the event, students have to visit businesses, organizations, stores to have knowledge about services and resources. Involvement in this service learning project will enable students to perceive homelessness from a different perspective and gain a first-hand experience about the issue. Another project that the students will be involved is food drive project. The students will be working with Clay County Public Health. The objective of the food drive will be to collect healthy food items in MSUM campus. Students will be working in groups and each student has to complete 15 hours of service learning. Students have to write two papers related to their service learning experience and get a completion form signed by his/her supervisor. Students have to write a mid-term reflection paper and a reaction paper at the end of the semester. These assignments give students an opportunity to discuss their service learning activities/projects and make the connection to materials discussed in class.

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

A. Incorporating service learning into course work is beneficial. But it needs proper planning, implementation, and documentation. I would suggest that service learning component should be discussed quite early in the course and expectation and requirements should be clearly stated. I found meeting and interacting with various potential organization prior to service learning was very helpful. This gives the organization opportunity to plan for projects for students. This is important so that the students as well as the organization benefit from the experience. I invite individuals from organization to speak to the class about the various projects. Service learning could be at times challenging because students schedules may not work with the organization’s schedule and some may have issues related to transportation. I would suggest that it will be very helpful to talk to colleagues and faculty members who are engaged in service learning to get their input and suggestions.