Exercise Science Students Get First-Hand Experience

Valerie Wherley, Sacred Heart University
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Sacred Heart University’s exercise science students have been busy this semester participating in various service-learning initiatives and clinics. Specifically, Professor Valerie Wherley’s pediatrics exercise science students (EX 320) have partnered with local schools in the Bridgeport area as a part of their coursework. Madison Elementary School in Bridgeport serves as one of the host sites for this component of the program. During the semester, students are asked to complete 20 hours of service learning work so they get first-hand experience working with children and adolescents, engaging them in physical activity and sports and seeing classroom and textbook concepts come to life.

“When I started teaching the pediatrics course, I knew it needed to be more of a hands-on experience,” Wherley said. “I thought working with schools in Bridgeport could be a win-win collaboration.”

Wherley has since created various clinics and partnerships with schools so that her students can get real-world experience working with children and adolescents. Along with the Madison Elementary School partnership, Wherley has organized clinics with Sacred Heart’s men’s volleyball team and with the SHU track and field team. At these clinics, children from the Bridgeport area are invited to Sacred Heart to participate in various athletic events with SHU’s athletes and exercise science students. The exercise science students actively engage with the children by partaking in these athletic events themselves while offering the children helpful tips and instructional points for the skills or activities that they are doing.

“The children enjoy working with SHU students and view them as role models, taking their advice and educational information quite seriously,” said Wherley. “The experience is rewarding for SHU students as well. Not only do they get the benefit of a learning experience outside the four walls of the classroom, but they learn how to communicate, assess, evaluate and, most importantly, have fun with the children.”

Senior Lindsay Aponte from West Islip, N.Y., has participated in all of Wherley’s clinics, even helping to organize a few of them. As co-captain of the women’s track and field team, Aponte
helped to organize a thrower’s clinic with athletes from Blackham Middle School’s track and field team. The Blackham athletes worked with the throwers from the University’s men and women's track and field teams, learning various training exercises and drills that would help them with their throwing skills.

“My favorite part about participating in all of these programs is the first-hand experience I received from working with the Bridgeport students,” said Aponte. “It is an amazing feeling to be able to share my gifts and to give back to young students within our local community. I want to be able to inspire students to continue to strive for their athletic and educational dreams, and these programs give me the opportunity to do so.”

Senior Juliana Kushnir from Easton agrees that these programs are making a difference. “To be given the opportunity to go out in the world and practice what we’ve been learning throughout the semester makes the whole experience much more beneficial,” she said. “Getting hands-on experience helps us to understand what this field is all about.”