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Award-winning programs integrate service learning, community stewardship

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Award-winning programs integrate service learning, community stewardship

ONE OF LINDSAY GERZEL'S first assignments as a volunteer tutor at Armstrong Elementary School was to teach the alphabet to Ernesto, a first-grader who spoke little English or Spanish.

Ernesto started out knowing few letters. So at her mother's suggestion, Gerzel says she began to teach him the alphabet song.

"The first time I sang it to him, I could tell that he had heard it before, but I couldn't get him to sing it to me," she says. "I would sing it over and over again, pointing at each letter on a piece of paper as I sang it."

In time, Ernesto learned the alphabet. And by the end of the semester, they had moved on to spelling small words, such as cat. "I felt so proud of him," says Gerzel, a rising senior.

Such results earned professor Sofia Kearns and her students in Spanish 240 (Latin American Civilization) accolades from the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, which awarded the course's mentoring program its Service Learning Award for 2010 in the Independent Colleges category. The honor recognizes projects by state colleges that best represent the integration of student learning with community service.

As part of the class, Furman students visit schools and community centers in the Berea area near the university. They are placed with English Speakers of Other Languages teachers, and for 10 weeks, at least two hours a week, they conduct one-on-one tutoring or work with small groups. A total of 48 Furman students were tutors during the 2010–11 academic year. Some, like Gerzel, continue to volunteer after Spanish 240 ends.

According to estimates from the U.S. Census Bureau, of the approximately 13,700 people in the Berea community, about 2,700 are Hispanic. Kearns points out that "students get acquainted with the Berea neighborhood that is adjacent to Furman but a world apart in terms of ethnicity, history, socio-economic and educational levels. They also learn of the successes and struggles of the ESOL program, establish working relationships with the ESOL teachers, and learn of current immigration issues. Getting to know this community is a life-changing experience for some of the tutors."

In winning the award, Spanish 240 followed the example of another Furman mentoring project, this one supported by a grant from the Howard Hughes Medical Institute. The Hughes program, "Advancing Science Education and Wellness in Urban Greenville Schools," won the Commission on Higher Education's Service Learning Award for 2009.

Through the Hughes project, Furman undergraduates provide weekly

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JEREMY FLEMING

one-on-one help to students at three Greenville middle schools. While staffed mostly by mathematics and science majors, the program also draws volunteers from other disciplines. In all, more than 40 Furman students mentor about 50 middle schoolers each semester.

Chemistry professor John Wheeler, director of integrative research in the sciences and of the HHMI-Bridges project, says, "Students at the middle school level are often considered to be most vulnerable with respect to the attitudes they develop toward education and their interactions with peers. In the STEM disciplines [science, technology, engineering and math], this period is often touted as the most critical time when students form impressions.

"If students fall behind in math and science at this time — even if they have tremendous natural ability — they may never catch up. For students who may have little infrastructure and support at home, Furman mentors fill a very important gap."

James Yawn '10, a chemistry major, says of his mentoring experience, "Many of the children in the program don't have the same support system I grew up with. It's difficult for these kids to take school seriously, since they haven't yet grasped how important it is. I wanted to help change that." And he did — he reports that one student with whom he worked "made significant improvement in his standardized science scores, much higher than state requirements."

Another chemistry major, Kayla Hammer '12, reports similar results. "One of my students was struggling in math, so we worked on that a lot. By the end of the year, he'd managed to pull his grade up to a B, and the next year he didn't need help with math at all."

Compiled from reports by Erikah Haavie and Katie Levans '07.