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UMBC Public Affairs Scholars Introductory Course Sequence with Service-Learning

UMBC's Public Affairs Scholars is a merit scholarship program for social sciences students desiring careers in public service, defined broadly. Experiential learning is a fundamental element of the program. Throughout their first year, students spend 3-4 hours a week in service that is connected to a two-semester course sequence. In following years, they engage in internships, may take a voluntary course on political activism and leadership, and conduct a senior project. Throughout their time at UMBC, they attend a special speakers series.

Service in the first semester is integrated with an introductory but demanding writing course. Placements are in organizational settings that are screened for quality, and are restricted to policy areas that will be addressed in second semester course--education, health, crime, substance abuse, family structure, and environment. The second semester course is an interdisciplinary review of social sciences, policy issues and policy analysis. Each course is worth 4 credits. Current versions of these courses may be found at: <http://research.umbc.edu/~meyers/eng100281h.htm>, and <http://research.umbc.edu/~meyers/pub150h.htm>).

We feel that the students receive numerous benefits from service engagement. They meet people with significant problems, and are often able to help them. Service confronts students with perceived realities that differ from their expectations. They must learn to cope with difficult and novel situations by improving how they understand other people and themselves. Writing is an excellent means of doing so, as are the occasional reflection sessions in which the students compare their experiences. Service also provides a rich alternative basis for learning about policy analysis, social scientific thought, and qualitative methods.

Our service-learning curriculum was designed in part by Summer Rosswog, a Peacemaker and Policy Sciences graduate student who worked with the program. Some service placements are arranged with the help of UMBC's nationally-recognized Shriver Center. A Serve-and-Learn Grant facilitated development of the writing course.