

NEWS

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Public officials, representatives of social action agencies, and private residents in Southwest Washington's Cowlitz and Wahkiakum Counties face a problem that confronts communities across the nation: How to comprehensive plan for and then systematically respond to the myriad of difficulties associated with mental health, mental retardation, alcoholism, and drug abuse?

Enter a group of faculty and students from The Evergreen State College who express interest in a field-oriented study project that will allow participants to come to grips with a real problem, learn community surveying and planning techniques, and develop a workable program proposal that directly responds to the subject being investigated.

Put these compatible desires together, mix in the approval of the Cowlitz County Board of Commissioners, and you have a potential answer to the problem of comprehensive community social services planning. The net result: a contractual agreement between a governmental body and an academic institution with the human resources to get the effort off the ground.

Approved February 27 the agreement calls for the Evergreen team to do an exhaustive community survey, analyze the data, draft a set of planning recommendations, and develop an action model for implementation.

Faculty members Maxine Mimms and LeRoi Smith are serving as Senior Co-Project Officers. Primary student consultants to the project are Mark Machlis and Leif Harris, both of Seattle. The student staff assistant is Judy Blackard of Mercer Island. Also involved will be a Portland State University student, Wendell Ellis, who is an intern with the Community Action Program in the Longview-Kelso area, and four students from Lower Columbia in Longview.

Dick Nichols, Director
Information Services

Additional consultative resources will be made available by Evergreen study groups dealing with urban planning, architecture and land use, and group and organizational change.

Preliminary work began in early February when the Evergreen study team discussed the proposed project with a joint facility and program planning committee of the Cowlitz-Wahkiakim Coordinating Board for Mental Health, Mental Retardation, Alcoholism, and Drug Abuse. Following the meeting, the faculty members and students drafted a program proposal--complete with a timetable for the study project--for review with Daryl Jenkins, Coordinator of the Cowlitz-Wahkiakum County Coordinating Board.

Once that preliminary work was completed, Jenkins and the Evergreen study group took the proposal to the Cowlitz County Commissioners for official review and approval.

Funded by a small planning grant from the state Office of Mental Health, the project began immediately and is scheduled for completion in mid-May. The timetable calls for a series of meetings with the Coordinating Board, coupled with at least two community-wide gatherings so that residents may discuss needs, priorities, and methods of activating a comprehensive mental health plan for the two counties.

Field work by the students will include developing a questionnaire for polling the 30 social agencies directly and indirectly involved in the areas of mental health, mental retardation, alcoholism, and drug abuse. This segment of the survey will include agency discussions of their needs and recommendations on how they would fit into a comprehensive program.

Another student activity will include polling community residents, probably in a door-to-door survey to get a solid cross-section of opinion and suggestions along social and economic lines. Still another surveying effort will be directed at churches and other organizations in the affected communities.

From that point, the student team will assemble and analyze the data for presentation to the Coordinating Board and at another community meeting. Then will come the drafting

of a final set of recommendations and an action model for presentation to the Coordinating Board by mid-May.

Final recommendations are expected to cover both future-oriented programs and facilities needed to deal with the four major problem areas.

Jenkins, whose Coordinating Board is an advisory body to the Cowlitz County Commissioners, said, "This project involves an attempt to help the community assess social planning needs in our two-county area. At present we really have no structured existing planning agency. We hope this project will give us the information we need so that we can get beyond the point of merely reacting to problems and do some program and facility development that meets needs ahead of demand. We're looking to Evergreen as a resource for helping us develop and activate this kind of comprehensive effort."

Evergreen faculty members Mimms and Smith said the project "is a first of its kind in that students have had a chance to work with a real social planning problem from the very beginning through development of a working model for community action. It's an exciting learning opportunity for the students and gives them a chance to put the theory they've studied on campus into practice where it counts--with real people, working on real everyday problems in the real world."

Both Jenkins and college officials feel the planning project could ultimately lead to additional study opportunities for Evergreen students. One possibility is inviting a study group that already is doing consulting work with a variety of educational, business, and social organizations to review and help implement recommendations of the comprehensive plan. Another is through the provision of agency student internships through Evergreen's Office of Cooperative Education, which coordinates practical work placements to help students bridge the gap between theory and practice. Such internships carry academic credit as part of the students' regular academic program.

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