

NEWS

The Evergreen State College

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Serving as consultants for school districts, state agencies and even private industry is all part of the academic work of 13 students at The Evergreen State College.

Enrolled in a group contract in Organizational Change, the young consultants have been working since last summer under the direction of Faculty Member Ted Gerstl, and their consultative skills have met with ready acceptance from their clients.

Reactions to the students' work is typified by Bob Coschnick, superintendent of the Green Hill School for Boys at Chehalis. "We've been working with Paul Marshall, (an Olympia student) and he has been very helpful in the organizational development process we've been going through here," Coschnick said. "He's been very much a part of the process and his contributions have been pointed and constructive."

Students are also contracted to Peninsula School District in Gig Harbor, Evergreen's Office of Developmental Services, and a student Kinship Group within the residence halls of the college. With each contractor, students have interviewed, diagnosed and worked with their clients on ways to improve communications skills and to build a spirit of teamwork within their organizations.

"The hardest part about our job is to get people to open up, to agree among themselves to talk about the real issues that are dividing them," Nancy Haller, a student from Renton, said. "We've found that, with a lot of patience and background preparation, we can help them bring everything out --- even grievances that are six to 10 years old and have been hampering communications all that time."

Students began their work with readings on forces of planned change, inter-personal

Dick Nichols, Director
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communications, group dynamics and systems theory dealing with ongoing organizations, Gerstl said.

At the same time, work on skill development in interviewing, diagnosing and counseling was begun and seminars were held to examine and share the students' feelings.

Initial contacts with clients began in the fall. "We were afraid clients might be reluctant to accept counsel from students," Gerstl said. "But so far neither the age nor the student status of the consultants has been a problem."

By November, students were gathering background data on their clients, interviewing them and conducting workshops, such as the three-day session two students and Gerstl held with members of the Peninsula School District staff.

"We met with administrators and principals several times before the workshop, then interviewed all members of the staff," Gerstl said. "Then, over an intensive three-day period, we gave them feedback on the data we had collected and tried to help them deal with the problems they themselves had identified."

The workshop was "really a positive experience," Roberta Newell, a student consultant from Tacoma, said. "People went away feeling like they had made a real step toward improving their organization and we felt very good about that." Follow-up consulting with the district will continue as students expand their work into different elements of the school system.

The team-building workshops, students have found, are just one area for successful consultation with clients. Students have also been involved with one-to-one counseling and 'interface' sessions. As an example, Gerstl cited the work of one student who has been helping two major levels of management in one organization find ways of improving their effectiveness as a combined management team ... "in essence making one management team out of two."

Gerstl, who has a doctorate in organizational behavior from Case Western Reserve University, in Cleveland, Ohio and has served as an industrial consultant for several years, explained that the main goal of his group contract was not to prepare students to be professional consultants.

"Most members of the group are interested in social service professions and have

set their career goals at working with individuals, groups or organizations," he said. "The main goal of the class is to study the dynamics of planned change with an emphasis on interpersonal communications. Consulting is one very practical way to see those changes and develop the necessary skills."

The group, comprised entirely of advanced students in psychology or social sciences, spends one day a week 'clinicing' together.

"They explain the problems they encountered with their clients and how they handled them," Gerstl said. "Then, their peers analyze the experiences and offer suggestions or criticisms which they may each apply to their next consulting session."

By mid-January all members of the group contract will begin four-month, full-time internships as consultants, but will continue to seminar together once a week. The internships will be completed in April and students will return to campus to complete their academic contract with several more weeks of 'clinicing' and generalizing from their specific internships to the whole field of organizational behavior, Gerstl said.

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