Civic Engagement & Service-Learning

Civic Engagement & Service-Learning Opportunities Shape Student’s Trajectory

When Katie Elliott enrolled in Professor Ellen Pader’s Urban Policies course, she was an undergraduate Architecture Major who was exploring opportunities. In this Service-Learning course, Katie was introduced to a partnering community organization, Massachusetts Fair Housing Center, that works to eliminate illegal housing discrimination in the region.

Professor Pader has partnered students with Massachusetts Fair Housing since the mid 90’s, engaging them in conducting research on housing issues in western Massachusetts, including collecting and mapping foreclosure and diversity data. In 2005, two years before the housing market collapsed nationally, Pader’s class provided Mass Fair Housing with 2 years worth of data and mapping on Springfield and Holyoke, outlining the factors that contributed to the eventual collapse. The data that is collected by the class is valuable to Mass Fair Housing for grant-writing, advocacy and determining how to proceed with their programs.

Katie says her eyes were opened, during the course, to realities previously unknown to her, kindling her interest in connecting architecture to social justice. Her investment in the course led Professor Pader to recommend Katie for the UMass Civic Engagement and Service-Learning (CESL) Liaison Program, a leadership opportunity for exemplary students. Enrolling in a leadership course offered by UMass CESL, CESL Liaisons return to the Service-Learning course that they have completed, providing added support to the faculty member, the community partner and the students in the course.

Katie was also accepted into a Summer Liaison Program that CESL was offering, supported by a Mass Dept of Education Vision Project. This summer position allowed Katie to work directly with Mass Fair Housing on projects including testing housing for accessibility and working with Amherst Fair Housing Now, a new initiative to keep affordable housing available in Amherst.

This summer work supported Mass Fair Housing’s initiatives and deepened Katie’s understanding of the work, strengthening her ability to serve as a Liaison in Urban Policies the next year.

As a result of her developing interests, Katie also enrolled in the Civic Engagement & Public Service Certificate program at UMass and designed a Senior Capstone project integrating design and social justice, working with architecture professors Joseph Krupczynski and Susan Jahoda.

Katie says these multi-faceted, community engaged learning opportunities have led her to re-think her career plans. She remains focused in architecture but has a more nuanced understanding that has led her to consider careers combining architectural design and social justice. One career path she is exploring is working with organizations that focus on low cost, sustainable housing design in Haiti and South Africa.

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