The Boltwood Project Connects Students To Community Members

For over 43 years, UMass Amherst has connected with local community organizations that serve community members who have developmental disabilities. Beginning in 1970, Professor Merle Wilman organized a course named The Boltwood Project, which connected UMass students to the Belchertown State Hospital where they provided enrichment activities for the residents. When Massachusetts journeyed through the deinstitutionalization process, the Boltwood Project began to partner with community-based organizations that provided services to people coming out of the state hospital setting.

The Boltwood Project offers students the opportunity to connect with people in the community and build relationships with individuals who are often different than themselves, and it provides reciprocal benefit to the community members and the students, as they learn about each other and enjoy regular time together. Many students enroll in The Boltwood Project for multiple semesters.

Today, The Boltwood Project is one of the many courses and programs supported by UMass Civic Engagement and Service-Learning (CESL), with over 100 students each semester enrolled each semester in the Boltwood Seminar. Students visit nine different community sites each week and attend three Saturday seminars. Through the course they learn about issues related to disability, explore matters of privilege and oppression, investigate social identities, and reflect on what they are learning through both the course content and their service time.

The Boltwood Project is also a student leadership program. Two student coordinators oversee the program, and thirteen student supervisors organize the weekly community visits and teach their peers. The fifteen leaders, enrolled in a Service-Learning Leadership course offered by UMass CESL, plan and conduct the Saturday seminar sessions, with support from their Faculty Director. Over 11,000 UMass students have participated in the Boltwood Project over the past few decades.

“The Boltwood Project offers students the opportunity to connect with people in the community and build relationships with individuals who are often different than themselves, and it provides reciprocal benefit to the community members and the students, as they learn about each other and enjoy regular time together.”

www.cesl.umass.edu