Students Teaching (Future) Teachers

Alternative Learning Program has education majors learning from middle schoolers

By Amy Stutzman
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The new students this year just got a whole lot shorter! Or did they? These short students are actually a group of middle and high school students who regularly come to campus for educational assistance.

This assistance is the Alternative Leaning Program, offered through the Center for Learning at EMU. According to Professor of Teacher Education Judy Mullet, university consultant for the program, it began in 1994 when the Rockingham County school board asked if EMU and Bridgewater College would be willing to provide education for students who are on long-term suspension from their middle or high school.

When the program started, it involved only one or two suspended students. This year, the program has four students, and by the end of the semester Mullet hopes it will have up to eight. Currently, students come to the program on a volunteer basis. Mullet said many of the students involved in this program because they are not doing well in school as they would like. This year is the first that the students can choose to stay in the program for a full year. Previously, students only stayed in the program for up to a semester.

Tutors develop a learning program for each student based on differing individual needs. The students not only learn academics, but also "nonviolent ways of solving problems," and they often develop lasting friendships with their tutors as well.

In a class offered through the education department at EMU, college students become directly involved with the Alternative Learning Program by developing curriculum. Although many of the tutors in the program are from EMU’s education department, the program involves students from other departments as well. Lynette Nussbaum, a senior education major and tutor with the program, said, "Last year I learned as much about myself as I am sure my student learned about [the subject]. Being a tutor has helped me explore my teaching styles and techniques as well as give me confidence that will be helpful during student teaching and when I have my own classroom."

The Alternative Learning Program utilizes many resources on campus. Often tutors take their students to cross-cultural chapels or special programs and use some of the different labs on campus while teaching.

So far, the program has been successful. "County representatives tell us that the program positively affects their students," said Mullet. Don Steiner, a co-developer of the Alternative Learning Program, also praised its success. "The alternative program at EMU exemplifies the best in education, that is, the success of every student regardless of circumstances."

The program benefits not only the students in the program, but the surrounding community as well. Mullet said that through the program, EMU is "giving back to the community for supporting...[EMU’s] teachers in [Harrisonburg area] schools."

Many of the student tutors see the program as an opportunity to reach out to others and learn about themselves. Paul Yoder, a sophomore and tutor with the program said, "I want to be involved in this program because of the implications and possibilities it presents in alternative education. I also see it as an opportunity to both touch the lives of individuals and to better my skills as a teacher as I look toward a classroom setting down the road."

Calling the program an "extension of EMU’s mission," Mullet said, "This is an opportunity to meet the needs of individual children in a way that isn’t always possible in a larger group of children, and that’s a wonderful opportunity for our teachers to learn about individual needs and to learn...how to teach nonviolent ways of solving problems."