

Monday, February 16, 2004

Dear Service-Learning Faculty Council,

I would like to support Denise Jacobs' nomination for the Outstanding Service-Learning Faculty Award based on our community partnership, which began in the Fall of 2002, when Denise was awarded a teacher-incentive grant for the composition curriculum we co-developed entitled, "Transcending Stereotypes in a Post-September 11 World." While we have modified and re-designed the class several times, our intent has remained the same: to meet the community needs of the English Language and Orientation Program (ELOP) students by providing them with opportunities to interact socially and academically with American students for authentic conversation practice and cultural experiences.

This class was designed to alleviate the crucial problem of cultural isolation that our students as newcomers to this country often experience. International students can spend months or years in the Baton Rouge area without integrating into the community or developing friendships with Americans. We know this because we hear our students complaining about how difficult it is to make the sort of connections they desire. Also, international students often ask us, as instructors, how to go about meeting Americans. Working with Denise's service learning class has been a major step in solving this problem.

We hoped when this idea was launched in January 2002, to facilitate the cultural interaction with Americans that our students so desperately need, especially in the aftermath of September 11 when some of our students felt vulnerable and unwelcome. We thought that this service-learning class had the potential to provide the interaction needed to confront the negative stereotypes that exist on the part of American and international students alike. We were mostly excited, though, about simply providing ELOP students with the opportunity to have an authentic cultural experience with American students, both inside and outside the classroom, and, in fact, that has been the strength of the curriculum Denise designed.

For example, just this semester, Denise's service-learning business writing students have organized several authentic cultural experiences, including a Cajun cookout, a billiards and bowling night, an evening with "Friends" (watching the TV show while enjoying a home-cooked meal together), a sports day on the Parade Grounds, a trip to the mall and movie theater and an LSU basketball outing. I wish I could convey to you the enthusiasm and appreciation my students have for the opportunity to enjoy these events with American students. Prior to this service-learning collaboration, many of my students would spend most of their free time with other ELOP students speaking their own languages and never seeing the inside of an American home or experiencing American culture firsthand.

I would like to add that Denise has been a pleasure to work with. She is generous with her time, visiting my classroom each semester to give my students a PowerPoint presentation on service-learning (which is a new concept for some of them), and generating interest in the project by showing a slide show of previous semesters. She also makes a point of inviting ELOP students to participate in and observe any of her writing classes during the semester. I have also been extremely impressed with Denise's professionalism and dedication to this service-learning project. She is never satisfied just to repeat the same curriculum, but is constantly striving to improve it, getting feedback from ELOP students and me on a regular basis in order to make changes to meet the specific needs of each new group of ELOP students. She also attends service-learning and other educational conferences whenever possible and has presented an interactive, PowerPoint presentation about our service-learning collaboration at the Gulf South Summit on Service-Learning in February of 2003.

Service-learning, as I understand it, begins with a community need and I have been impressed with Denise's ability to construct cooperative assignments between her students and mine that enable her students to achieve their academic goals while meeting my students' need for cultural interaction and "real" English practice. Some of the assignments Denise has designed include: interviews, cross-cultural explorations of current events, photo-caption essays, bio-sketches, shared fiction and non-fiction readings and cultural presentations on both sides. My students have learned from hers about crawfish boils, LSU's football culture, Mardi Gras and bachelorette parties. We have also shared class periods talking about controversial issues like racism, the war in Iraq, date rape and anti-Americanism abroad.

In conclusion, I am pleased to recommend Denise for this faculty award. I think the entire ELOP staff would agree with me as one of our most recent developments, asking Denise's students to sit in on and participate in our ELOP classes as part of their service-learning requirement, has enlivened all the ELOP classes, not just the ones I teach. The interaction between Denise's service-learning students and ELOP students has not only benefited our students individually, but has also helped revitalize the ELOP program as a whole. We are grateful for Denise's commitment to helping our students adjust to life in Baton Rouge and for her service-learning class's much needed participation in our students' lives. I cannot think of anyone who deserves this Outstanding Service-Learning Faculty Award more than Denise Jacobs.

Sincerely,

Stacey Patton  
Instructor, ELOP  
394 Pleasant Hall  
work phone: (225) 578-5642  
home phone: (225) 819-8383  
spatton@lsu.edu