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Back to elementary school for SFU undergrads

Contact:

Kitty Corbett, [Phone removed]; kcorbett@sfu.ca

Nadine Trambellini, [Phone removed]; ntambellini@sd43.bc.ca

Carol Thorbes, PAMR, [Phone removed]; cthorbes@sfu.ca

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A first of its kind course in Simon Fraser University's Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) will send undergraduates to elementary school - specifically Central Community Elementary School in Port Coquitlam - this fall.

The course is based on a service learning model that is popular at American post-secondary institutions and sparking interest in Canada because of its ability to build campus-community ties and enrich students' academic learning.

By integrating traditional in-class learning strategies with volunteer work -commonly known as service learning - and sharing reflections on that integration, students practically apply academic concepts in a community setting.

Kitty Corbett, an SFU health scientist and director of FHS undergrad programs, and Nadine Tambellini, the principal of Central Elementary School, are applying the model in FHS' offering of community and health service.

Corbett worked extensively on shaping courses based on the service-learning model at the University of Colorado-Denver in the late 1990s.

This past spring, Corbett and Tambellini brainstormed about the model at a gathering of SFU faculty members and Coquitlam School Board staff, who were discussing campus-community partnerships, and decided to offer the new course.

Students taking the new three-credit, semester-long course - open to FHS bachelor degree candidates - will learn about community-based health promotion in a three-hour class, once a week. The class will be held alternating weeks at SFU's Blusson Hall and Central Community Elementary.

Students must also put in a minimum of four hours a week of volunteered service work at the elementary school, on projects that practically apply their academic learning.

'Students could be putting on healthy living workshops for parents and students, creating and delivering programs that promote physical activity or creating an after-school literacy or community garden project,' says Corbett.

'It's definitely a win-win for all,' says Tambellini who adds that Central is different from other elementary schools because it more heavily involves outside community members in its service projects. 'SFU and Central students, staff and families will learn from each other. The university will provide expertise, enthusiasm and mentoring to our school community. In turn, SFU students will have a first-hand opportunity to try out their individual skills in projects of their choice and learn civic responsibility.

About 15 students - at least a third of whom are Asian - have registered so far for the new course, which has an enrolment cap of 18.

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