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Life in Iowa Homecoming Institute

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Life in Iowa Homecoming Institute

Abstract
College students were immersed in Iowa community life for ten weeks each summer. They worked with mentors to complete internships and community service projects.

Keywords
Philosophy and Religious Studies, Community-based food systems, Human systems demographics and beginning farmer programs

Disciplines
Agribusiness | Human Geography | Philosophy | Religion | Rural Sociology

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Life in Iowa
Homecoming Institute

Abstract  College students were immersed in Iowa community life for ten weeks each summer. They worked with mentors to complete internships and community service projects.

Question & Answer

Q: If college students are given the opportunity to study the art of “living well in place” in the classroom as well as with the community mentors, would this affect their future relationship to Iowa and its communities?

A: The majority of students (approximately 68 percent) indicated that Life in Iowa made it more likely they would stay in Iowa. No student answered that their experience made it less likely. However, this statistical breakdown is tempered by qualitative responses that often included a reference to a hope and desire to remain in the state, but also an expectation that they would not be able to find well-paying jobs in their areas of study.

Approach and methods

The structure of the Life in Iowa program was based on combining:
1. Academic reading, discussion, reflection and writing;
2. Student internship and service in communities across Iowa; and
3. Support of students from campus and community mentors.

Students who were interested applied for admission to the program in the fall. Those who were accepted committed to a sequence of courses, including a three-credit spring seminar which provided a framework for experiential learning in the summer. Students in this class read, wrote about, and discussed Iowa as a place, as a means of understanding its unique historical, spiritual, economic, social and ecological characteristics.

At the same time, they secured internship and service work in Iowa communities. During ten weeks in these rural communities, the students worked on internships and service projects, learned from their professional and community mentors, and took responsibility as stewards of their chosen communities. By summer’s end, they were required to have completed 300 intern hours and
100 hours of service to a community in their internship area. Students continued to write and reflect while they were in their summer home communities, prepared final reports, and made presentations on their experiences.

Funds from the Center were distributed to employers in the form of mini-grants to support these efforts. The employers applied for the money via proposals for work with sustainable agriculture and food systems, conservation and rural development. Funds could be used to pay intern salaries and cover some program costs.

Results and discussion

Twenty-one students were supported by the Leopold Center via the Homecoming Institute internships from summer 2002 through summer 2005. In the final two years of the program, ISU Extension made changes to the scope of the Life in Iowa program that ultimately resulted in termination of the program. In FY 2005-06, one student contributed 100 hours of service at Harrisdale Homestead near Atlantic. While she did not complete a formal internship, the character of her classroom and experiential learning kept faith with the spirit of the Homecoming Institute.

Conclusions

This was an educational program rather than a scientific project, so there were no scientific data or conclusions to report.

Impact of results

Life in Iowa gathered Homecoming Institute participants in April 2006 to consider the impact of the program. Among the group were eight of the 22 students funded by the Leopold Center, five internship employers, two faculty members, and two staff members who had been involved in the program.

The names, majors, and internship and service affiliations of the Life in Iowa Homecoming Institute scholars are as follows:

2002

Kristen Garrett Corey (Sociology & Environmental Studies)
Internship: Women, Food and Agriculture Network, Denise O’Brien
Service: Cass County Conservation Board

Jennifer Friel Headlee (Sociology & Environmental Studies)
Internship: NE Iowa RC&D, Lora Friest
Service: Practical Farmers of Iowa & Postville Visitors Center

Amy Freiburger (Public Service & Administration in Agriculture)
Internship: Organic Valley Family of Farms, Bob Brague & Wayne Shaker
Service: Practical Farmers of Iowa

2003

Shawn Corey (Construction Engineering)
Internship: Big Sioux River Recreation Corridor, Wayne Schlotfeldt
Service: Big Sioux River Recreation Corridor

Susannah Eddy (Agricultural Education)
Internship: Henry A. Wallace Country Life Center, Diane Wieland
Service: Adair County Extension, Ann Holste (Agricultural Business)
Internship: One Step at a Time Gardens, Jan Libbey
Service: City of Belmond

Intern Laura Walker working at Harrisdale Homestead, Atlantic
Comments from the employers indicated that they had made a conscious effort to truly mentor their interns in sustainable systems. One discussed the link between sustainable farm systems and sustainable community. Another talked about the efforts he made to integrate his intern into the community. Students’ comments reflected on how well they had learned the lessons from their employers and mentors. One noted that what she learned via the internship meshed well with her Environmental Studies major.

While students and mentors alike were appreciative of the unique learning opportunity afforded by the Homecoming Institute, they were equally frustrated and dismayed by the lack of support from the university. One mentor pointed out that it was difficult for students to find this sort of internship in the first place. Another cited the program’s value to the community, particularly as a bridge between farms and community, and lamented the lack of such options at the university level.

Formative and summative evaluations were conducted each year in the Life in Iowa program. The Homecoming Institute Colloquium of April 2006 focused on the overall impact of the Institute. A summary of the evaluation conducted at that event gives the Institute high marks: “Every summer hundreds of students fan out across the
country to do internships. Few of those internships have the depth of impact on student thinking we saw reflected in participants’ comments even years after their Life in Iowa experience. We conclude that the combination of effective preparation through reading and reflection and immersing students in their internship community with the support of true mentors were key factors in creating a meaningful and worthwhile experience.”

The post-internship evaluation also included a qualitative inquiry: “What have you learned about “living well in place?” Student responses varied about what they had learned, e.g., some indicated a fuller awareness of the natural environment; others emphasized community participation and citizenship. Several students referred to the new appreciation they had for Iowa, the importance of relationships for sustaining local communities, and the examples of dedication and hard work provided by summer mentors.

These data suggest that the Life in Iowa program provided practical knowledge and skills for leading more environmentally and socially responsible lives, regardless of where students someday live, as well as to a greater appreciation for Iowa. However, the majority of students see themselves as “realistic” about the potential for finding the jobs they seek. The attitudes and skills connected with entrepreneurship, while often modeled by summer mentors, were not generally noted by students in the immediate evaluations.

Education and outreach

Presentations at two academic conferences discussed the role of Life in Iowa in revitalizing Iowa’s rural landscape. Four presentations on the program were given by Homecoming Institute students. Articles about the program appeared in the ISU Alumni Association’s Visions magazine, the Adair County Free Press, Hawarden Independent, Ames Tribune, Belmond Independent, Lifelong Learner, Akron Hometowner, Fort Dodge Farm News, Akron Register-Tribune, and a report aired on KLEM-Radio, LeMars.

Leveraged funds

In addition to ISU Extension and the Leopold Center, Life in Iowa received funding from every ISU College except Engineering. The Office of Financial Aid, and the Office of International Students and Scholars also provided support. Student internship wages were shared by the program and employers. The College of Liberal Arts & Sciences continues to support the academic program, and students are still offered the opportunity for experiential learning.

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