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ONLINE EDITION

Published in the Columbia Spectator (<http://www.columbiaspectator.com>)

TC, Peace Corps Urge 'Learning by Doing'

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Created 02/08/2008 - 3:14am

Students from Brooklyn International High School gathered in Zankel Hall at Teachers College on Thursday to present multimedia projects they completed last semester as part of their school's service-learning program. The exhibit, "Teaching for Social Change: A High-School Learning Extravaganza," was hosted by the Teachers College Peace Corps Fellow Program to showcase the benefits of the service-learning style of teaching to the faculty and administration at Teachers College.

Though some TC Peace Corps alumni are already engaged in curriculum planning at Brooklyn International, Teachers College hopes to further expand the program that allows Peace Corps volunteers to study and earn degrees at the college while working at experiential NYC schools, according to TC president Susan Fuhrman.

"There are so many innovative things going on at Teachers College, but this one, service-learning, and especially with immigrant students, is a great opportunity for Teachers College to address the social issues and bring social issues to the classroom," said Nicolas Stahelin, service-learning coordinator of the Peace Corps Fellows Program.

Following the philosophy of "learn-by-doing," service-learning allows students to explore contemporary social issues as part of their standard curriculum. For the students of Brooklyn International High School—which caters to an immigrant population speaking English as a second language—the program permits them to work on creative projects in each of their academic subjects in lieu of traditional classroom and test-based work.

The students' projects all focus on social problems prevalent in today's world, including hunger, homelessness, and natural disasters. Practicing collaborative skills, the students publish several dual-language newspapers—in the students' native languages and English—that will be distributed throughout the community and also created PowerPoint presentations and YouTube videos with the goal of cultivating awareness about their chosen topics.

Two alumnae who helped design the developed curriculum, Shahzia Pirani-Mellstrom and Laura Berson, spoke positively about the students' responses to their work.

"Students feel a great sense of empowerment and they feel like they can make a difference ... and that they have a voice in their community," Pirani-Mellstrom said.

"Service-learning takes academics into communities. It gets students to think about how they can problem-solve in their communities, so you're making them active leaders."

Brooklyn International Assistant Principal Pamela Taranto also praised the "hands-on project-based" learning program that allows students to study academic subjects through the examination of larger social issues. They are dealing with issues that directly impact them in their lives," she said.

Service-learning coordinator of the Peace Corps Fellows Program, Nicolas Stahelin indicated the possibility of some stumbling blocks. Stahelin said those involved are "still learning the process of trying to bring things to Teachers College," adding that for now, "the best thing we can do is to just bring this to the attention of faculty and administration so they start bringing it into their classes, into their curriculum."

Presenting their research at tables set up along a corridor, students expressed passion for their schoolwork and the issues they had studied. "It's very interesting for me because it's about us and our lives and it's important," said Stefaniya Nazarova, whose Russian- and English-language newspaper includes an article about each subject she studied last semester. "We're the future and we have to know what to be aware of," she said.

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