

Learning Outside the Classroom at AUNE

Posted on Tuesday, October 11th, 2011

Polly Chandler, director of the MBA in Sustainability Program at Antioch New England (AUNE), is an environmentalist to the core. But her vision for a better planet transcends typical "green" goals like promoting recycling or converting to fluorescent light bulbs.

"Our program is about instilling sustainability practices throughout organizations. That's much more complex—and goes much deeper—than purely green initiatives," she says.

As Chandler explains, environmental stewardship is a big part of sustainability. However, sustainability also encompasses ideals such as social justice, environmental justice, and responsible economic development.

Navigating this challenging terrain requires a solid intellectual grounding as well as real-world experience to see how theory actually translates into practice. "We're grooming people to be sustainability champions and leaders of change in organizations," says Chandler. "We want to make sure they graduate with the skills they need to get these types of jobs."

The Road to AUNE

Chandler grew up skiing, exploring marshes, catching turtles, and walking in the woods in her native Minnesota. She fondly recalls family trips to the University of Minnesota Landscape Arboretum, where she still returns on occasion to "recharge and reconnect with nature."

After graduating from the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point with a bachelor's degree in resource management and environmental science, Chandler earned a master's in science education from Arcadia College in Philadelphia, taught science to everyone from kindergarteners to senior citizens, and worked for several environmental organizations.

She earned a second master's in education (administration and supervision) from AUNE in 2004 and joined the faculty of the Department of Organization & Management two years later. There, she was part of a small team that launched the MBA in Sustainability Program in 2006. She has since served as director and led the development of weekend and accelerated options.

Chandler notes that unlike many similarly themed offerings, the MBA in Sustainability Program has sustainability in its DNA.

"Some traditional MBA programs add one or two classes on sustainability and then call it an 'MBA in sustainability,'" she says. "What we're doing—integrating sustainability throughout all the classes—is a totally different ballgame. Students learn how sustainability fits in systematically throughout the curriculum and throughout the types of organizations in which they now work or will work someday."

Gaining Experience in the Field

Experiential learning is a key component of the AUNE philosophy and of the MBA in Sustainability Program. Through learning journeys (extended field trips) and other ventures outside the classroom, students see firsthand how organizations put sustainability into practice.

Chandler teaches Earth Systems and Organizations, in which students consult with a local business or nonprofit on how to address a particular sustainability challenge. Recently, students worked with a New Hampshire county to identify new revenue streams from its farm. After spending a semester researching the issue, the students presented their recommendations to a group of about 50 officials and other individuals.

Another Earth Systems and Organizations project involved Cabot Creamery, a Vermont dairy cooperative famed for its cheeses. Cabot wanted not only to calculate its waste stream but also to determine whether it was creating more than its fair share of the state's total waste. The students' presentation was "really well received," according to Chandler.

Marketing, finance, and other classes in the MBA in Sustainability curriculum all offer similar opportunities for practice-based learning in the form of service outreach.

"Reaching out to the community at the experiential level: You can't beat it for giving students the experience they need," says Chandler. "It's especially beneficial for our younger students. For those who haven't had a job in the field yet, it becomes a critical asset, the first thing they list on their CV."

An education that is rooted in experience, Chandler adds, produces graduates who are better prepared to make their mark in the world.

"Our graduates have their fingers on whole organizations and entire communities. If you think about the 'pebble in a puddle' image, we send 16 people out into the world with these skills each year, so the sphere of influence is amazing," she says. "My ultimate goal in this work is protecting this planet, being an advocate for the world. I can be a very effective advocate by doing what I'm doing now."

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J. Cynthia McDermott – Antioch University Los Angeles

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J. Cynthia McDermott's career has taken her to some incredibly diverse places, from the streets of Philadelphia to the rural countryside of Moldova. A common thread running through her experiences is a desire to make the world a better place for those who lack a fighting chance.

Last year, Dr. McDermott received a prestigious honor made possible by her life's work: She was awarded a Fulbright Scholar grant to teach and train on civic engagement in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

"This was a huge recognition of what I've attempted to accomplish in my career," says McDermott, education program chair at Antioch University Los Angeles (AULA). "As an academic, it's one of the true jewels in the crown."

McDermott spent from February to June 2011 at the University of Sarajevo and three other institutions. In collaboration with faculty, she developed "train the trainer" models to encourage the creation of democratic classrooms that support civic engagement.

A Lifelong Interest in Social Justice

Growing up in a family of Irish union firefighters sparked McDermott's interest in social justice. She credits her commitment to democratic teaching, meanwhile, to her progressive undergraduate education at Millersville University.

McDermott launched her professional career in 1971 as an English teacher in rural Pennsylvania. Over the next 18 years, she earned a master's degree in education, organized a reading program to assist gang members in her hometown of Philadelphia, taught bilingual kindergarten in Compton, California, and more.

In 1989 McDermott began an extended period in higher education by joining the staff at California State University, Dominguez Hills. Nine years later, she was chosen as a fellow for the Soros Foundation Open Society Program. From 1998 to 2005, she volunteered in Moldova, Armenia, and Romania, partnering with educators to help students foster critical reading skills.

She views her work in those former Soviet republics—along with the rest of her career—as building upon the ideals she developed as an undergraduate at Millersville.

"My interest has always been in promoting the health of our democracy," she said. "To do that, we need citizens who are good critical thinkers and understand the principles of good democratic practice."

Answering the Call

In 2009, three years after coming to AULA, McDermott learned that Bosnia and Herzegovina had submitted a request for civic educators through the Fulbright Program. Suspecting she had the ideal skill set, she decided to apply.

Following a complex, lengthy review process, McDermott was named a Fulbright Scholar in May 2010. About eight hundred U.S. faculty and professionals travel abroad each year to teach and/or conduct research through this highly competitive program.

While living in Sarajevo, McDermott trained the people who train teachers and other educators on democratic teaching practices. One of the fundamental problems with education in much of the world is what McDermott calls "the old lecture style."

"It's all, 'Sit down and shut up, do what I tell you to do,'" she notes. "The student has no ability to ask questions, to participate. Research shows that doesn't generally encourage people to be critical thinkers."

This issue is exacerbated in a place like Bosnia and Herzegovina. While the country has a highly educated population, it also has a history of autocratic rule and lack of civic engagement. Worse yet, citizens today feel powerless to effect change due to the bureaucratic governmental structure, says McDermott.

"Everything I did over there was geared toward creating an environment where students and faculty can get in touch with their voice," she says. "Because you can't see yourself creating change if you don't have a voice."

While McDermott's stint in Bosnia and Herzegovina ended in June, she has already returned to the country as part of her work with Step By Step, an early childhood program. And you get the feeling that more international travels await, all in the pursuit of a greater good.

"Our ideals are what frame who we are," says AULA's first Fulbright Scholar. "When you take those with you, that's how you fly."

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AUM Alumna Makes Her Mark

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Over the past 25 years, Sylvia McMechan's devotion to conflict resolution has placed her in the middle of some fascinating disputes.

Sometimes the stakes are huge with lives at risk, as when she tried to diffuse political violence in the West African country of Guinea-Bissau. Other times, the impact is far more localized, like when she helped two siblings in a family of eight adult children resolve their longstanding differences.

McMechan graduated from Antioch University Midwest (AUM) with a master's degree in conflict resolution in 1997. A pioneer in the Canadian conflict-resolution field, she continues to mediate often complex disputes while also teaching at AUM and other universities. (In addition, she is completing a doctoral degree in social and ecological sustainability.)

"I work as an educator, a mediator, a facilitator," she says. "Whatever role I assume, I'm encouraging all parties involved to consider, 'How can we do this together?' We're all together in the same metaphorical canoe. Blaming one another for the mess we're in doesn't help. Better to paddle together toward constructive options."

Quaker Upbringing Shapes Career

McMechan's parents came from conflict-torn countries—her mother from Germany, her father from Ireland—and early in their marriage decided to raise their children as Quakers.

"That's the heritage I unwittingly adopted, and the values I grew up with sparked my interest in this career," she says. "Growing up as a Quaker, the emphasis on peacemaking and consensus building was always there."

After graduating from the University of Waterloo in 1989 with a bachelor's degree in environmental studies, McMechan planned to pursue a master's in environmental mediation. But while waiting to start the program, she accepted a position with the Fund for Dispute Resolution, which was housed at The Network, Canada's leading conflict-resolution organization.

"I figured there were many people in the environmental field already," she remembers. "But the conflict-resolution field was brand new. It needed people, and I felt I could have more of a lasting, positive influence in conflict."

Moving on to AUM

McMechan eventually became executive director of The Network and even managed to carve out time to study conflict resolution at AUM.

"Getting the master's degree was the key to my credibility. It's about trust—clients like to see you have a master's," she says. "The experience at AUM also helped me confirm the value of what I was doing. I wrote my thesis on the values and principles for collaborative conflict resolution, so I was thinking about these things very deeply."

In 2000 McMechan co-founded Diamond Management Consulting with husband Richard McGuigan, PhD, who also studied conflict resolution at AUM and now chairs its Conflict Analysis and Engagement program. She has since served as a mediator and facilitator with a focus on natural-resource disputes involving government agencies, indigenous communities, and corporate interests.

Finding Common Ground Over Salmon

McMechan's career has taken her around the world. In Liberia she evaluated a mediation program that supports re-integration of prison detainees into society. In Fiji she trained mediators on how to bring consensus-style decision making to their cities and villages. In Uganda she evaluated The Carter Center's conflict-resolution initiative, which aimed to end violence perpetrated by the Lord's Resistance Army.

One of McMechan's greatest triumphs came back home in British Columbia, where the Fraser River flows rich with salmon. In 1999 conflict threatened to erupt among various parties with salmon interests, including indigenous people, conservation organizations, recreational fishers, and commercial fishers.

McMechan spent time during the ensuing decade helping these disparate stakeholders find common ground. The result of their efforts—the Fraser River Salmon Table Society—strives to reach mutually beneficial resolutions that address each group's concerns.

"It all comes down to identifying everyone's enlightened self-interest, which, in this case, is having more salmon in the river," says McMechan. "It took a lot of difficult conversations." But once all the stakeholders realized they shared this overarching goal, the dynamic shifted and they were able to work together."

Moving forward, McMechan plans to continue making a difference through her work in the field and in the classroom.

"I do this work because I believe we won't survive as a species unless we figure out how to resolve our differences together," she says. "I'm willing to do everything I can to encourage my fellow humans to work together to resolve issues of common concern."

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