

Welcoming UMBC into the world of service

Nine college students and one college professor arrived at an overgrown vegetable garden. A generator hummed on the back of a black minivan across the cracked and worn street. A mural of a fist holding a scale weighing people and food adorned the wall behind the garden. Crumbling yet still vibrant row homes stood all around, and this garden was the only green the group could see. This patch of green was the handwork of Pigtown Food for Thought, and this group was brought here by a program called the Welcome Week Service Project.

The Welcome Week Service Project is an annual event run by Student Life. Its purpose is to connect students with social causes and nonprofits in the Baltimore area as well as student organizations.

The hope is that the students explore opportunities for community engagement, “learn about long term service-learning, and make new friends!” said Romy Hübler, Coordinator of Student Life for Student Organizations and a co-organizer of the Welcome Week Service Project.

This year Student Life partnered with three Baltimore-based nonprofits, several UMBC departments,

and eight different student organizations.

While students were working at these nonprofits, the coordinators from the respective organizations explained their vision.

Two groups visited Boone Street Farm, which turns vacant lots in Baltimore into productive farmland, and Patterson Park Audubon Center, which provides habitats for Baltimore’s migratory birds.

Students also traveled to Pigtown Food for Thought, an organization that works to address food deserts — areas without access to healthy food — and food security, which is the confidence people have that they will get another meal.

A fourth group of students stayed on campus to beautify our Herbert Run Greenway, a path designed by students in 1995 to highlight some of the campus’s natural features.

This year’s Welcome Week Service Project was very distinctive in that Student Life made many changes to the program.

For the first time, the co-organizer of the project worked with student organizations to find out what students are involved in and interested in. Four of the eight partnering or-



Students receive supplies in the Commons to prepare for their day of service at Herbert Run Greenway. Photo by Katie Lee.

ganizations sent a representative as a Peer Advisor to the trip that was most aligned with their cause, and the remaining groups sent a representative to the lunch afterward to talk about their organization and how students can get involved with various service projects on campus.

Organizers also ensured that students could reach the nonprofits after the service trip was over. These changes were all a result of the co-organizers’ effort to be “more intentional” in the way they run the project, asserts Hübler. She believes that the project has “come a long way,” but says that the surveys from participants and advisors will tell more about the degree of success of

the changes.

More immediate feedback, though, came from the students’ reflections at the reception which included the following words: enlightening, awesome, purposeful, wake-up call, rewarding, meaningful, interesting, supporting, community engagement and connecting.

BY DAVID BARRY
dbarry1@umbc.edu
Probationary Writer

