

Teacher Candidates Bring Project ALERT to the Classroom

by Andrea Warren

When Pam Foster started her job as a prevention specialist in January 2003, she learned that one of her many responsibilities was to teach Project ALERT.

The program had been offered through Recovery Resources in Adams County, Illinois, for 12 years and was already underway in seven school classrooms when Foster took over. She immediately went online, completed the ALERT training and got certified, then was off and running.

And she was so impressed with the program that she wanted to see it in all the schools, including every parochial and public school in Quincy, the county's largest city. When she talked to administrators about ALERT, she learned that schools were receptive to the program and were willing to give student time in health education and life skills classes to get it, but couldn't commit to the costs or teacher time. Could Foster provide those?

"I had enough grant money from the state to cover my time and the materials not already provided by Project ALERT. But I was a one-person office and obviously I couldn't teach it alone. Seven schools were already too much. My option was to use volunteers," Foster said. "So I started brainstorming."

She thought about trying to use senior citizens, retired teachers, or community volunteers. Then the idea came to her. Quincy University, a small Franciscan college with 1,200 students, had an outstanding teacher education program. Education majors were required to complete field work in the Quincy schools before they did their student teaching. Middle school students might respond to college students--young adults closer to them in age and with all the "coolness" factor of being in college. This could work!

Partnering with the University

Foster took her idea to Quincy U's dean, who liked it and pulled in Alice Mills, PhD, from the School of Education.

When the dean approached Mills, "he told me this lady from the community needed help." Mills was apprehensive about becoming involved with the Project Alert program. Then she talked to Foster, whose enthusiasm for Project ALERT was contagious. "I had never heard of it, but on paper it sounded okay. The first time I saw it in the classroom, I became less apprehensive."

What developed from that first meeting between Foster and Mills was an enthusiastic collaboration that began with the 2003 - 2004 academic year and now involves every student graduating from Quincy University who will be seeking certification at the middle/junior high level. While taking Mills' course on "Middle School Methods and Philosophy," students are assigned to a classroom where singly or in teams of two or three--depending on how many are enrolled in Mills' class--they teach Project ALERT to seventh graders and the booster lessons eighth graders.

Foster meets with Quincy students their first day in Mills' course. "When I tell them what they're going to be doing, some react like deer caught in headlights," Foster said. "First there's the idea that they'll be teaching seventh and eighth graders, when many of them plan to be elementary or high school teachers. They haven't yet done their student teaching, and most of them feel unsure of their ability--but they always do fine. After I introduce the program we go to the computer lab and I help them register on-line so they can work through the Project ALERT training and get certified."

Mills acknowledged that some of her students are wary in the beginning. "They may be elementary education majors and scared of presenting to older children. Or they may be secondary education majors with less interest in the younger children. They certainly hadn't counted on teaching a drug resistance program when their majors are in math, history, music, and other subjects. They leave for those seventh grade classrooms unsure about all this, but they come back with confidence."

It works so well, Mills said, because Project ALERT provides everything necessary to teach the course. "They get their training online. They learn the teaching strategies and the curriculum, and they receive the work sheets, the lesson plans, and even evaluation forms, posters, and videos. The materials are so well designed that even my students with very little teaching experience can present them."

Sharing Experiences

What is especially useful from Mills' perspective is that since her students are all teaching the same thing, they can bring their experiences back to the classroom for reflection. "We discuss everything that happens. It's an excellent learning experience for the college students when kids bring up questions that my students have to research so they can give a correct answer." Recently one of the college students was asked a question about the manufacture of marijuana products, and that required extra work to find the information.

"This experience is an excellent way for the students to break in to teaching. As their professor, I appreciate that very much."

Foster sets up all the arrangements with the schools. She meets Quincy University students at their assigned school on their first teaching day.

She introduces them to the health education teacher and sits in on the first day of class. After that, she stays in touch with both the school and with Mills.

Quincy University students are currently teaching in both the public and parochial schools in Quincy and in some of the county's rural schools. One Quincy University student even convinced the principal at a school for children with behavioral disorders to let him teach the course and it's been well received.

"When I was teaching Project ALERT, I really enjoyed it, and I was sure the Quincy University students would too," Foster said. "It's an all-around great program for everybody."

Foster is nearing her goal of getting the program into every school in the county. "I am hoping that gradually the schools will take it over. One school has already committed to that, but we have a long way to go. I also feel it's made a difference. Our drug use numbers have either dropped or stayed the same. We have other community groups also working hard on this problem, so it's a combination of everything."

Raising Community Awareness

Quincy faces the same problems as other communities across the country. In addition to abuse of alcohol, cigarettes, over-the-counter and prescription drugs, it has its share of methamphetamine labs and young people experimenting with inhalants and aerosol sprays.

Janet Bick, principal at St. Peter Parochial School for 20 years says that drug use among young people has hit home in the community. "We've had a number of accidents involving teens and alcohol and we recently lost a student at our Catholic high school in an accident where drinking was involved. I have never had a parent object to us teaching Project ALERT. They want anything that will help their kids make better decisions in the future."

Bick has been delighted with Quincy University students delivering the course. "Our kids think college students are cool. They listen in a different way than if a teacher or I presented the same information. Our seventh graders love the hands-on activities. They're learning and experiencing things that hopefully they will remember. Like when they put on gloves and try to unwrap a piece of candy to understand the loss of sensation you experience if you're inebriated. They also put on glasses that affect their vision so it's hard to walk a straight line. Instead of a teacher just telling them that they'll have loss of sensation or balance if they drink too much, they experience what it's like. Kids remember that."

Ann Behrens, former principal of Quincy Junior High School, who joined the faculty at Quincy U in fall 2006, concurs. "I helped introduce ALERT at Quincy Junior High and liked it immediately. It's a proactive approach to teaching responsible decision-making. There's some advantage in it coming not from Mom or Dad or the regular teacher, but from someone closer to the kids' age."

"This is a powerful program. It would be wonderful if every school district could adopt it, but I don't know what the chances are. Schools are under pressure from every direction. It gets down to budget versus time. You're forced to make decision you don't want to make. We're fortunate that Pam Foster has figured out a way for our kids to get this valuable information."

Educating Future Teachers

For the Quincy students who teach Project ALERT, the rewards are also numerous. Not only do they get teaching experience, they learn a lot. Matt Lawrence, an undergraduate history major at Quincy who is now a graduate student at the University, said he found the course material very informative, particularly all the statistics.

Lawrence liked the way the course was structured and that the lesson plans were all prepared—and that they work. “When I did my actual student teaching history, I carried over some of the things I had done in Project ALERT. For one thing, I had learned that it can be more effective to have the kids present information to each other in a group than for me to stand in front of them giving lecture. That’s definitely a great teaching technique.”

Lawrence hopes to teach history in the same high school he attended in a suburb south of Chicago. He knows it will help that he has his Project ALERT teaching credential on his resume. Whatever classroom he ends up in, he’ll have his eyes on the school’s drug education program. “If it’s not Project ALERT, I’ll bring up my experience.”

He remembers when a seventh grader put him on the spot about how much college students drink and asked Lawrence if he drank. “I was 21 at the time. I answered truthfully that I enjoyed having a few beers. But I told them I was of age, and when I was their age, I didn’t touch the stuff. Their questions sometimes threw me off, though, and I wish I’d been better prepared for that.

“I think college kids bring a different dimension and a good one because they relate to us. They don’t see us as an authority figure. Their eyes would light up every time we came. We knew this was an important responsibility. I thought it was a positive experience--a fair trade with the time it took, that’s for sure. I got as much as I gave.” Mills and Foster know this too.

“If the children put them on the spot because they’ve heard about binge drinking on campus or other drug issues, our students have to think about the image they’re portraying,” Mills said. “Some of them become reflective about their own behaviors.”

Foster agrees. “Don’t tell anybody,” she said with a smile, “but I think it’s good for them.”

“If the children put them on the spot because they’ve heard about binge drinking on campus or other drug issues, our students have to think about the image they’re portraying,” Mills said. “Some of them become reflective about their own behaviors.”

Foster agrees. “Don’t tell anybody,” she said with a smile, “but I think it’s good for them.”

Meet Pam Foster

Foster has spent her career in human services. An Illinois native who grew up in Quincy, she majored in law enforcement administration in college and then worked as a police officer at the University of Chicago for seven years.

She moved back to Quincy and spent eight years as a residential counselor at a treatment facility for youth before moving to Catholic Charities as director of pregnancy and parent support services. Since January 2003 she has served in her current position as prevention specialist with Adams County. On her own time, she works with people in recovery.

"I've always had public jobs working with people," she says. "It's what I like to do. With each job I've grown and learned. I feel real fortunate."

Foster can be contacted by e-mail at pam@recoveryres.org, or by phone at 217-224-6300, ex.106.

Meet Alice Mills

Alice Mills is a life-long Midwesterner who grew up in Topeka, Kansas, and completed her PhD in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in Statistical Research at Kansas State University. She is also a life-long educator, beginning her career as an elementary school teacher, then teaching math in both high school and at a community college. Before moving into college teaching, she was a school principal for six years.

She has been at Quincy University for 13 years, where she is director of the Master of Science in Education program and an associate professor in the School of Education.

She characterizes Quincy as a family-oriented community with numerous churches and parishes. "It's very picturesque here," she said. "It's a nice community to live in."

For more information, Mills can be contacted by e-mail at millsal@quincy.edu or by phone at 217-228-5456.

Quincy, Illinois, and Its University

With a population of 46,000, Quincy lies along the banks of the Mississippi and is across the river from Missouri, a hundred miles north of St. Louis. It was once a busy steamboat port and was a stop on the Underground Railroad during the Civil War. It is home to its own symphony, opera company, and community theater, and many of its homes, churches, and several museums are on the Historic Register. For balance, every summer it hosts the U.S. Catfish Anglers Tournament.

Quincy University was founded in 1860 and in its early years trained Franciscan priests. Today it is a private liberal arts Franciscan Catholic institution offering both undergraduate and graduate degrees, and has a student-faculty ratio of 12:1.