

Community Preservation Institute

Priscilla Geigis
Director of Community Preservation
priscilla.Geigis@state.ma.us

Linda Silka
Director, Center for Family, Work and Community
linda_silka@uml.edu

ABSTRACT

The Community Preservation Institute (Institute) is one of the major results of the Commonwealth Partnership between the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs and the University of Massachusetts. This collaborative effort between EOE and UMass taps the best resources in education, government, and citizen groups to assist leaders in learning about and applying community preservation principles in their communities.

The Institute is designed to help Massachusetts local leaders explore tools, techniques and resources to use in their own communities and neighboring communities to help preserve and enhance the “sense of place” that is unique to each of our 351 cities and towns as our communities continue to develop. It is intended to provide students with an understanding of community preservation as a concept for planning and growth, and is designed to expose them to a variety of integrated topics that communities are addressing as they continue to develop and evolve. Students’ diverse backgrounds range from teachers, zoning/planning board and conservation commission members, to engineers, lawyers, farmers, planners, and directors of non-profit organizations.

The Community Preservation Institute is a certificate program that consists of nine 2 ½ hour courses over a ten week period. Course topics include land preservation, diversity in community preservation, water resource and open space protection, historic preservation, transportation, community revitalization, and specialty topics developed with the course location in mind. Launched in Spring 2001, the Institute will graduate its 5th class on May 28th, 2003, totaling alumni at 253. It has been offered at all five UMass campuses (Amherst, Boston, Dartmouth, Lowell and Westborough) making the Institute and excellent example of five-campus collaboration.

The Institute incorporates several core strategies including team teaching, online resources, feedback sessions, team projects and continuing education credits. The Institute is team-taught by professional educators, government officials, and citizen group leaders. Each week, a new pair of teachers introduces the class to a new topic for discussion and study. The knowledge and diverse viewpoints of these professionals, in addition to the access to resources they individually provide, are an integral part of the Institute and provide a well-rounded learning experience for the students. Having representatives from these various organizations, programs, and academic backgrounds helps to educate and inform our students on where to go for information beyond the Institute teachings.

The Institute is an ever-evolving program. As part of the team teaching model, the Institute recently incorporated a “Lead Instructor” model to help move the Institute toward a possible graduate or undergraduate course for credit at UMass. Through this model, the Lead Instructor gets a feel for taking part in each of the different classes and offers some continuity by weaving a thread among each of the different topics, and explaining how they fit together as a whole. Other changes incorporated are those suggested by students through feedback sessions that we hold once a semester. Information from the feedback sessions is used when looking at future course offerings, locations, and topic choices.

Additional Institute highlights and resources include the Community Preservation Online Learning Center, team projects, and continuing education credits. This online resource give Institute students and alumni from the five different campuses a common place to interact and connect with one another. The learning center offers a web-based message board where students and alumni can post questions relating to the topics covered by the Institute for one another, a rolodex of fellow alumni and students, and access to the current materials being used in each of the class locations.

In order to become more intimately involved with a specific issue related to community preservation, participants complete a Team Project concerning a real issue that a Massachusetts community is currently facing. Several groups of students from Fall 2002 have had the opportunity to take their presentations from class, and present them to their actual town planning and zoning boards with positive results. Finally, students who complete the necessary requirements are eligible for Continuing Education Credits that are awarded through the campus at which they attended the Institute.