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Hurricane Katrina Major Focus of Sociology Course

KEUKA PARK, N.Y.—Hurricane Katrina has caused one Keuka College faculty member to alter the direction of his sociology course this fall.

Assistant Professor of Sociology, Criminology and Criminal Justice Michael Messina-Yauchzy deepened the focus of his *Collective Behavior & Social Movements* class to further address collective behavior in disaster situations.

“[Collective behavior in disaster situations] is a topic that is covered extensively in one of the textbooks I had already considered for this course,” said Messina-Yauchzy. “I was planning for the course to cover topics that are common in this field: collective violence, riots, disasters, mass frenzies, consumer crazes and fads, rumors, and protests.”



Messina-Yauchzy had also “been looking for something active in which the students could engage.

“I had earlier proposed they work on projects of their own choice that would involve them in observing collective behavior and/or participating in a social movement,” said Messina-Yauchzy. “The Katrina disaster just galvanized my thinking in a definite direction. What better way to learn about collective behavior than to focus on what is dominating the news right now and is so much in everyone’s hearts and minds. Not only is the immediate behavior of those caught up in the disaster something we want to understand, but the community and organizational responses themselves can be studied as collective behavior as well.

“Even the national groundswell of motivation and action to help the disaster victims, with many people raising donations and volunteering to help, gives us examples of collective behavior,” added Messina-Yauchzy. “The Internet is providing some new approaches, as websites list hundreds of families around the country offering to take homeless survivors into their homes. How does such an idea spread? How is it communicated? How do communities spontaneously organize in response to disaster? How do organizations and various levels of government work together, or fail to? How do organizations, policies, and government priorities change following a crisis? These are some of the questions we’ll address.”

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KATRINA MAJOR FOCUS OF COURSE 2

The 10 students enrolled in the class are required to research the latest events following the disaster in the news and Messina-Yauchzy is also sharing stories he has learned about through the media.

“I want the students to be very well informed about what’s going on in the Gulf Coast,” said Messina-Yauchzy. “We will want to sort out the best information.”

The majority of Messina-Yauchzy’s students have expressed interest in doing a group Field Period in the region in January.

“I will be looking to Executive Vice President Carolanne Marquis, who has begun organizing a Keuka College response on a campus-wide basis,” said Messina-Yauchzy. “Other faculty, staff, and students are also interested in volunteering and, perhaps, doing a group field project in Louisiana or Mississippi. Executive Vice President Marquis has previous experience working with the Red Cross to involve students in disaster relief. Tamara Day of the Center for Experiential Learning’s Community Service Resource Center is also working to coordinate Red Cross training for students who may head south to help.

“I expect that my collective behavior students will take the Red Cross training and will work through the Red Cross and whatever other organizational affiliations that Executive Vice President Marquis and Ms. Day establish,” said Messina-Yauchzy. “We will also be looking at training materials available through the FEMA website. And, of course, we’ll look at selections from the large body of sociological work analyzing collective behavior in disasters, including that available through the Disaster Research Center at the University of Delaware.”

Messina-Yauchzy expects the team-building and problem-solving skills his class acquired in recent training provided by TeamWorks! The Birkett Mills/Keuka College Challenge Experience to be beneficial as well.