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Edwin Smith
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College of Liberal Arts given federal funding for fifth consecutive year

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OXFORD, Miss. – The University of Mississippi College of Liberal Arts is leading the fight against poverty through education, thanks in part to a federally-funded volunteer program.

The North Mississippi Volunteers in Service to America project entered its fifth year of funding from the Corporation for National and Community Service. Directed by Stephen Monroe, assistant dean of the college, VISTA brings more than $575,000 annually into the region.

"In the last four years, VISTA has partnered with university departments, local nonprofits and schools in rural areas to build and strengthen programs that fight poverty through education," Monroe said. "Our VISTAs serve with passion and energy. They are selfless people who work behind the scenes to improve lives in Mississippi."

Examples of VISTA projects include a back-to-school fair in Tupelo that benefited thousands of low-income students, a community mentoring program to help children in the DeSoto County Youth Court system, tutoring and fundraising collaborations between UM's LuckyDay Academic Success Program and Crenshaw Elementary School in Panola County, and the Horizons Summer Learning Program on the Ole Miss campus.

Most VISTAs have been recent graduates from UM programs, such as the Croft Institute for International Studies and the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College. Doug Odom, a 2013 graduate with bachelor's degrees in classics and English, spent last year building academic support programs for low-income college students and raising funds and recruiting volunteers for youth programs. He is attending graduate school at Vanderbilt University this fall.

"The most fulfilling aspect of the VISTA project, at least in my eyes, is the fact that it's so focused on education," said the Jackson native, who launched an after-school and summer program in Abbeville during his time as a VISTA. "I had the chance to help coordinate educational programs for elementary students in impoverished areas, as well as programs for first-generation college students from low socio-economic backgrounds. The students may have differed in age, but the underlying focus of all of the programs was the same: improving education in my home state."

Many other VISTAs have followed a similar path, going into graduate programs at New York University, the University of Georgia, Harvard University and Stanford University.

"VISTA service benefits include a living allowance and education award," said Susan Nicholas, assistant director of the program. "I believe the greatest benefit is the professional experience volunteers receive while honing their skills in program development, fundraising and engaging in diverse communities. All these are important to future employers and graduate school admissions committees."

Although most VISTAs come from the university, others such as Susan and Allen Spore of Oakland, California, are recruited from out-of-state. The retired couple will be stationed at different schools in north Panola County.

"We had been researching for full-time volunteer programs, including the Peace Corps and VISTA, and were interested in working with youth and in public schools," Susan Spore said. "We did extensive research on the Internet and felt the University of Mississippi had the best all-around VISTA support and had projects that were in line with our interests."

The couple's son, a Jackson attorney, encouraged them to consider Mississippi. After visiting Oxford, the Spores decided that it would be a great place to live during their assignment.
"My short-term goal is to start a literacy reading program for the lower grades at Crenshaw Elementary," Susan Spore said. "A long-term goal is to develop and train volunteers to expand the program and ensure sustainability and investigate the feasibility of writing programs."

Her husband shared similar objectives.

"My short-term plan is to assess the needs for college/career awareness programs, determine potential resources and partners, and recommend possible programs for the North Panola High School," Allen Spore said. "My first long-term goal is to develop and implement college/career awareness programs, including recruiting volunteers to staff the programs and ensure sustainability. Secondly, I want to develop a fine art photography program for North Panola High/ Junior High and to recruit volunteers to implement and sustain the program."

Monroe said he is grateful to CNCS for the work made possible by its grant.

"We’re inspired everyday by our VISTAs,” he said. “They are people of action who are strengthening our state.”

For more information on VISTA service opportunities, contact Susan Nicholas at Nicholas@olemiss.edu or 662-915-1905.