

Coburn, about 25 miles east of State College, is the site for the University's Coburn Project. The project would teach

students from different disciplines of study how to observe the problems of a rural community.

photos by Ken Kasper



Field study to provide small town perspective

By MARY ANNE MULLIGAN
Daily Collegian Staff Writer

One student's attempt to make a change in the basic structure of the University may lead to a unique field study experience for social science majors.

The Coburn Project would provide action-oriented field experience in the study of rural life in and around Coburn, a small village 25 miles east of State College.

According to Ernie Kuhlman (13th-political science), the originator of the project, students would study the politics, society and economy of the Coburn area. The goal of the project would be to assess general problems, causes and trends of rural America and

to eventually be able to provide input that would improve the quality of life in the area.

Kuhlman said the project is an outgrowth of his philosophy that "the University, as an institute of higher learning, is falling short of student needs." He said the University is no longer "a student-education institution" but rather it has become "more of a research-oriented facility."

Kuhlman also said he believes the University is not meeting the needs of the people of Pennsylvania as required of a land-grant institution.

The University is concentrating too much on the corporate development of agriculture and not enough on the needs of the small family farmer, according to Larry Spence, assistant professor of political science. He said the University is partially responsible for the economic, social and political depression now being felt in rural Pennsylvania.

University students, by and large, come from urban and suburban areas. They return to these areas without ever coming to know the problems of rural areas. Consequently, they are not prepared to make intelligent professional decisions affecting rural communities.

Kuhlman said the Coburn Project would teach students how to observe rural America without noticing just its beauty. "Students would learn 'how to find the intricacies and problems present in rural communities,'" Kuhlman said. "It's the only course I know of on campus that does that."

The idea for the Coburn Project was born in a democratic political theory course taught by Spence last year. Spence and the other students were intrigued with Kuhlman's idea and spent the remainder of the term studying the possibilities of producing a workable experience from an abstract thought.

Students from the first course carried the project over into another course and this term it has mushroomed into a research assignment for six students in Political Science I.

Kuhlman said students find the project to be "like a good book you can't put down."

Ideally, the Coburn Project would become a 12-credit field experience course in which students would actually live in the rural setting of Coburn. In this sense it would be somewhat of a practicum in the College of the Liberal Arts.

Students planning to enroll in the program would take a three-credit introduction to the project and would

participate in a three-credit post-project seminar.

The course would be open to students from different disciplines — the political and social sciences, agriculture, human development.

The project would require faculty commitment over a number of years. Spence said this has been a problem because faculty promotion and tenure are based on a "crude index of number of publications." He said the University "has to make changes to make space for new types of projects."

Eugene Melander, assistant vice-president for undergraduate studies, said the University "cannot remain static in its programming." He sees the Coburn Project as an attempt to integrate classroom experience with field situations where principles and concepts are operational.

"The possibility for such a program is certainly there," Melander said. He said he knows of no University policies that would prevent a program like the Coburn Project from being implemented.

Money could be another matter. Melander said he doesn't know if funding for a program like the Coburn Project is available. He said, however, that with "the spirit of instructional research and development," such a program might be possible within a single department.

Interest in the Coburn Project has been expressed by others within the University. Emory Brown, assistant director of the Cooperative Extension Service, said his staff would be willing to work with the project because students might act as "catalysts" in improving "the quality of life in rural areas."

Roger Musser, a former resident of Coburn who now lives in the nearby town of Spring Mills, said that the University "has really just started to do something" for the people of the area through the extension service. He said that the people of Coburn "are fairly excited" about the project.

Musser, and his wife Lynne, said although the people of the area are very friendly, they are also "very, very speculative."

Linda Mock, who has lived in Coburn for nearly six years, said she feels she is "just now starting to belong." Although residents of Coburn are generally enthusiastic about the project, students are not likely to be accepted completely.

Kuhlman said residents of the area see the University as "elitist." He said he hopes the Coburn Project can change that image.



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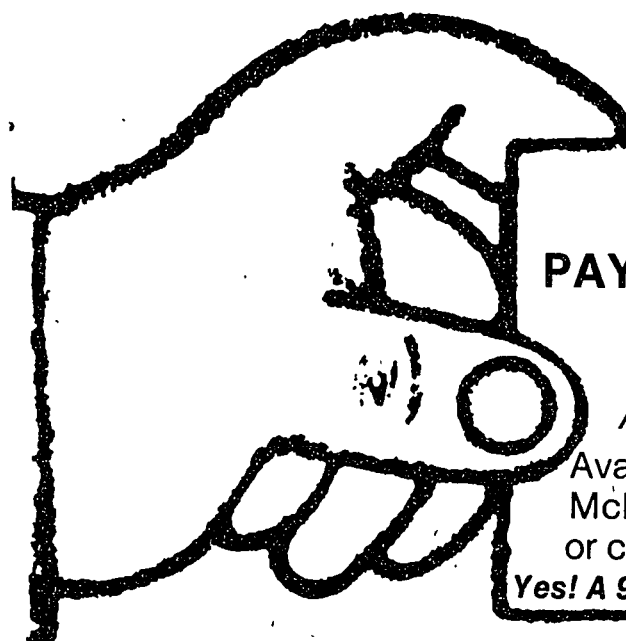
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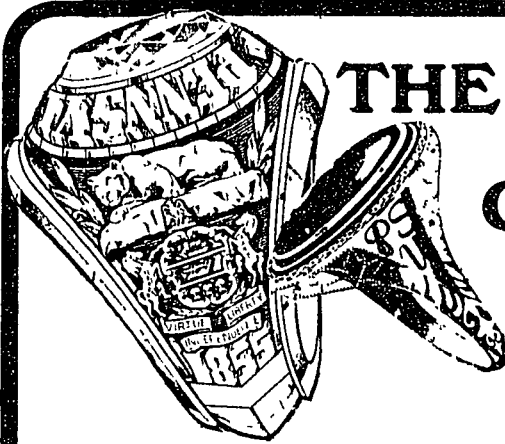


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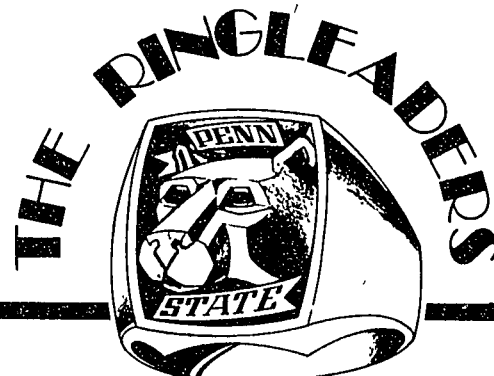
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