

Tracey Winters



New Course Offers Youth Justice Training

Guillaume Lepage wants the teens on probation and the kids on the street. He wants the 15-year-old gang members one step away from jail, and the kids who run away from home. He's a new breed of student in British Columbia, a student in the Youth Justice Program at Douglas College.

"Some youth just need a kickstart because they don't know any better," says Lepage. "This program gives me a chance to help them develop personal interaction and communication skills; help them to develop a better sense of who they are. I don't say 'I'd be happy if I could help just one person.' I'd be choked if I only helped one person; I want to help lots of them!"

The Youth Justice Program, which started in Fall 2001, prepares graduates to work with youth in conflict with the law in a wide variety of settings. Spearheaded by Douglas College Child and Youth Care instructor Dave Burgess, and Criminology instructor John Fleming, the two-year program brings criminology and child and youth care courses together to fulfill the needs of many groups.

"There's a definite supply and demand problem in the youth justice sector," says Burgess. "Employers have told us they need qualified employees. There are also many people who have learned their skills on the job, but now

find that they need credentialing as well as specific training."

"We also wanted to be responsive to student demand," says Fleming. "We had students in criminology and child and youth care classes who wanted to work in the youth justice sector, but couldn't get the training they needed at school. We weren't designed for that—the child and youth care program is mainly about child welfare, while criminology emphasizes academics. So, Dave and I put our heads together about four years ago and started working to get this program underway."

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The combination of practical skills and academic study works well for Lepage. "I use my criminology knowledge as the structural framework, and then wrap the warm and fuzzy counselling skills around it," he says.

Two practicums give students real-world experience. Lepage's first session is at Camp Trapping, 50K southeast of Prince George, where he'll work 16-hour

days, seven days on, seven days off. And he can't wait to get there.

"I'm stoked," he says. "The kids are around 15 years old, they're all on probation, and this camp is their last chance before they end up in a correctional institution. It's a great chance to help them learn communication and anger management skills, and give them the ability to lead a productive life. My ultimate job would be working at a place like Camp Trapping or in a Downtown East Side shelter, where I'd be dealing one-on-one with youth. I want to be a front line worker; I want to be in there getting my hands dirty."

For Burgess and Fleming, students like Lepage are just one of the many rewards of the Youth Justice Program. In December 2001, the team received the Award of Faculty Excellence for their work in creating the program. Educational institutions have also shown support in the form of province-wide transfer agreements, allowing students to transfer their credits and complete a degree. ▲

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