Judy Sharkey

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Just like the rest of the nation, New Hampshire is becoming increasingly diverse. From urban centers to smaller communities, the state is seeing an increase in immigrant and refugee populations. There are more than 80 languages and dialects spoken in Manchester schools alone, and some elementary schools in Nashua and Manchester now have majority-minority populations.

Thanks to Judith Sharkey, UNH students entering those schools as teachers are highly prepared to meet the needs of these children and their families who bring rich cultural, linguistic, and sociopolitical resources to the state. Sharkey has been a leader in the University’s effort to best prepare the next generation of New Hampshire’s teachers to serve the state’s growing population of English language learners.

“During my 30 years as an educator, I have been privileged to work with many people who have impressed me with their dedication and skill in creating communities and learning environments that support diversity and individual difference. Judy is at the top of this list for me,” attests Kate Hanson, professor and chair of the Community Leadership Program.

To Sharkey, diversity is a resource, one that is needed to help citizens understand how to create and support productive, healthy environments. “The world is a complex place and we need teachers who appreciate complexity, are curious, inquisitive, and see their work as connected to determining which opportunities and experiences are open and/or closed to all members of our communities—and then ask ‘why?’” she says.

Sharkey points out that she feels very fortunate to have worked with some amazingly talented and passionate people who are dedicated to equity and social justice. These experiences have led to wonderful collaborations on campus and in New Hampshire communities. The most rewarding projects are those in which the participants feel they have been personally and professionally transformed.

“In the last two years, three of our graduate teaching interns conducted projects with their students that challenged restrictive language policies and advocated for alternatives, which they presented at a conference attended by local and regional teachers, administrators, and faculty, Sharkey notes. “In short, our students are not just learning about diversity, they are becoming effective advocates and professionals whose work is positively impacting the communities they serve.”

—Lori Wright