MORE CHALLENGING

When Jasper Hunt and several graduate students in experiential education built the first challenge course for the Adventure Education program twenty years ago, they used old telephone poles to create the structure. When it became obvious that they needed to replace that course recently, they decided to use steel posts instead.

"Woodpeckers attacked the telephone poles," says Hunt, the director of the Adventure Education Program and a professor of experiential education and leadership studies. "We insisted that our new course be made out of steel poles."

He also insisted that it be one of the best challenge courses in the Midwest. "Bottom line, we wanted to continue offering the people of Mankato and beyond the best experience possible," Hunt says. "We want to be the Mayo Clinic of experiential education."

The challenge course includes several adventure-based risks designed to improve teamwork, build trust, and better both communication and leadership skills. Each activity, from walking across a pole situated forty-five feet above the ground to crossing a pair of tightropes with a partner, is carefully designed to be both an individual and a group challenge.

"Everyone in a group participates in each activity," Hunt explains. "And if those people don't do their jobs, it doesn't work right. It's a real serious program that demands a high level of performance by the whole team."

The new course is built with both high and low elements, all of which can be tackled one at a time. Each includes a carefully constructed level of risk. Although safety protocols are always in place, participants play an active role in their own protection. "We minimize danger," Hunt says, "but we don't eliminate it."

Although many University organizations, from sororities and learning communities to athletic teams and student groups, use the challenge course, the general public is invited to reserve time as well. Church groups, school groups and business organizations have all enjoyed experiences at the course, Hunt reports.

What's Cooking?

Dr. Brenda Flannery wanted the students in her Principles of Management class to have an authentic learning experience last fall. She wanted something that would go beyond textbooks and into real-life application. She wanted them to develop a connection with both the campus and the community at large.

She found exactly what she was looking for in the new Campus Kitchens initiative, a national collegiate program that distributes unused food to the hungry.

"I went to talk to the staff in the Student Leadership Development and Service Learning Office and they said.

"We have the perfect project for you," Flannery remembers. "Campus Kitchens is like a start-up business; everything needs to be created."

The Campus Kitchens project at Minnesota State Mankato is one of only seven in the country, and the only one located in a rural area. The program, which is being coordinated by the Student Leadership, Development and Service Learning Office and funded by a $67,000, three-year grant, will use about 150 student volunteers to collect, package and distribute food to needy area residents.

Flannery's students — 130 total in two different sections of the same class — have been divided into teams to tackle different elements of the project. Some are working on fundraising, some are creating a web page, others are building a storage unit for the donated food. Some have been able to tap into contacts they've already developed through part-time jobs or family.