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Local View: In summertime, the UMD campus only feels empty

From the column: "Over the summer, the campus opens to the community and the community opens to the campus. That buzz, that hum of activity, leaves Kirby Drive and can be felt around the region."



University of Minnesota Duluth (2012 file, Steve Kuchera / News Tribune)

Opinion by David Beard

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The hallways of the University of Minnesota Duluth feel empty in the summer. At least, they feel empty to visitors to campus expecting to see 10,000 students. You expect a buzz, or at least a low hum, of activity as students learn everything from American Indian studies to psychology to pharmacy and water resources science.

But it's June. Most of the classrooms are locked, with summer courses moving online. The dormitories are shuttered or, in some cases, filled with seniors taking advantage of summer activities on campus and in Duluth.

In my heart, though, the campus is still full. It's just that, over the summer, the campus opens to the community and the community opens to the campus. That buzz, that hum of activity, leaves Kirby Drive and can be felt around the region.

Our students are working internships that work the land. They are completing engineering co-ops with mining companies on the Iron Range. They are doing research for the DNR at Sax-Zim Bog. They are growing vegetables on the Land Lab just off Jean Duluth Road. They are putting the insights gained in their classes to work.

Our students are aboard the research vessel Blue Heron, a boat operated by UMD as part of the University National Oceanographic Laboratory System. Directed by faculty from UMD's Large Lakes Observatory, the Blue Heron takes students (and, sometimes, members of the public) onto the water to do research and to teach science.

At the same time, across the bay, some of my students are helping keep the Vista fleet (and other tourism partners) "afloat" in the busy summer season. Students use their unscheduled summertime to pick up seasonal jobs that make Duluth's visitor season possible. And their ideas, their projects, their labors are making the summer run more smoothly.

I teach in the writing program, and I see my students' work everywhere. A pair of writing majors from UMD reorganized and rewrote the intern handbook for the Duluth Huskies. The interns are essential to making the Huskies one of the best entertainment values for Duluth.

A group of students in my "Languages of Advertising" class developed communication strategies to promote telehealth in rural Minnesota.

Those strategies fed into a regional nonprofit's work to advance telehealth from Grand Marais to Cloquet.

In summer, the division between “town and gown,” between the community and the university, erodes. Instead, the students give to and learn from the community in the most powerful and direct ways.

I'm in my office, working, and I used to wonder where my students went in the summer. But really, now, I feel them, and the effects of their work, every day. I hope you do, too.

David Beard teaches writing and communication at the University of Minnesota Duluth. He wrote this for the News Tribune.

David E. Beard

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