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ESF wants its students to try a night at the theater

Discount ticket program will let students take note of community's cultural options.

Tuesday, August 17, 2004

By Nancy Buczek
Staff writer

A local college president has come up with a plan he hopes will help encourage college students to stay in Central New York after they graduate - and help boost the local economy.

Cornelius "Neil" Murphy Jr., president of the State University College of Environmental Science and Forestry, plans to spend \$5,000 of the college's operating budget - likely from tuition and student fees - on discount tickets and transportation to Syracuse Stage, the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra and the Milton J. Rubenstein Museum of Science & Technology.

His hope is students will see the community as vibrant and decide to make Central New York their home.

"It's great to have young people going down into the city for something other than going to a bar," Murphy said.

Murphy came up with the idea in response to a Metropolitan Development Association report, released in February, that said young people will stay in Central New York if they view it as lively. Also, an ESF student opinion survey found students want more cultural and social experiences.

Report co-author Richard Florida has said a strong creative class - essentially people with jobs such as scientists, technology workers, artists and writers - is critical to the health of a local economy. Communities that are tolerant of diversity and offer a variety of social and cultural events attract these type of workers, he said.

"You could identify the great opportunities for high-tech growth, but if you don't have the people staying in the community because your community is not 'with it' as Florida put it, you're not going to be able to retain and, more so, attract people to fill the jobs," said Irwin Davis, MDA president.

It's not unusual for local colleges to encourage students to patronize the arts.

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But Murphy's effort links patronizing the arts with following the MDA's recommendation that community leaders take steps aimed at improving Central New York.

"We need to do more of the things like what ESF has started," Davis said. "In order for a region like this to grow, but more so, to survive, business leadership and government must think outside the box."

Murphy is now challenging local restaurants to complement the 505 tickets the college plans to purchase. His idea is students could get a free or discounted meal and then see a concert or show.

Jim Heffernan, ESF's vice president of student affairs and educational services, said most tickets will be given to freshman mentor groups and freshman writing classes. Some will be awarded to students of any class year for community service activities, he said.

Andrea Sinchico, president of the Central New York Chapter of the New York State Restaurant Association, said Murphy's idea sounds like a great way to get students into the community.

"I would be disappointed if some of our members didn't get involved and do something like that to help promote Syracuse as a hospitality area to students that even live here and students who are coming in from outside the area," said Sinchico, manager at Little Gem Diner on Syracuse's Spencer Street.

Chris Kuhns, chef and co-owner of Phoebe's Garden Cafe, across Irving Avenue from Syracuse Stage, is working with ESF to see how the restaurant could get involved.

"Phoebe's could see up to 150 new faces that will come in here, and they'll get a chance to try the food and maybe come back with their parents," Kuhns said.

Many area colleges have arts programs designed to get students into the community and to give them social alternatives to drinking alcohol.

For about 10 years, Syracuse University has run a program, formerly Arts Adventure and now called Pulse, that brings performers to campus and encourages students to attend local cultural venues.

"There are a lot of students who are coming to Syracuse Stage during the fall and spring semesters," said Tracey White, Syracuse Stage's group and corporate sales manager. "If you make the concerted effort that they're trying to do with the students and put the ticket in their hand, which is what ESF is doing, they are more likely to make their way down the hill to the theater."

Last year, the Syracuse Symphony created its College Classics series, which offers student subscriptions for \$5 per concert, said Marshall Whinney, SSO's marketing director. About 175 students took part, the majority from SU, he said.

Larry Leatherman, MOST director, and chair of Syracuse Stage's board of directors, said Murphy's plan fits well with the MDA report.

"I think it's very important to this community that we build additional relationships between the students and our cultural institutions," Leatherman said. "The more of that we can do, the better it is for all of us."

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