Students studying in Angers, France, during the 2011 Spring semester took part in a pilot community-based learning course designed to deepen language abilities and enhance understanding of Molière plays and French culture. Taught by on-site director Paul McDowell and organized under the guidance of Rosie McDowell, a staff member of the Center for Social Concerns, twelve students participated in weekly visits and discussion groups at a local retirement home.

Shared Reading Workshops
Dubbed “shared reading workshops” (ateliers de lecture partagée), these weekly visits were structured around specific scenes from Molière plays taught by Paul McDowell in the course. Students read aloud the scenes in small groups with their elder partners who corrected pronunciation and explained difficult vocabulary. Each week, starter discussion questions, along with the texts, served as departure points for conversation about travel, family and cultural differences between the US and France.

As the semester progressed, the students gained confidence in their ability to discuss literature in French but also in their day-to-day vocabulary and expression. Retirement home staff and residents alike remarked on the students’ progress and looked forward to the visits. The residents took pride in their role helping foreign students to learn French and generously shared their time and stories with their visitors. One unintended outcome, according to the staff, was that the residents participating in the reading workshops began to interact with each other more often, comparing their sessions with the students. Having foreign students to mentor became something the residents shared in common.

At the end of the semester, students performed the scenes they had read with the residents at the retirement home as a presentation of their progress. This performance served as a way to thank the residents for their role in the students’ learning and provided an afternoon of entertainment at the retirement home for other residents, too.

Future Developments
The retirement home staff and residents are eager to continue their role in helping students learn French. They will have the chance to do so in the 2012 Spring semester, when the new resident director of the Angers program, Prof. Odette Menyard, will offer a course for students on women in Loire Valley literature. The establishment of community-based learning courses in Angers provides a model of combining service-learning and language learning that benefits not only the students but is appreciated by members of the host community. The Center for Social Concerns will continue to facilitate and support community-based learning courses in Angers and throughout Europe in cooperation with the Office of International Studies and on-site staff, faculty and community partners.