



Learning New Ways to Serve

By Jay Buckner



More Berea Classes are Incorporating Service-Learning

Rebecca Chaney, '04, lives to serve others. Whether conducting research on community service or feeding hungry children (two of her current projects) or helping to establish a non-profit resource center for immigrant workers in her hometown of Bowling Green, Ky. (a project she started before she came to Berea), Chaney intends to make service to others her livelihood. Before then, she has much to learn. “I need to educate myself to the extent that I can while I have the opportunity,” she explains. “Then I can take these things I learn and try to apply them so I can help better others’ lives.”

As student service-learning coordinator with the Center for Excellence in Learning Through Service (CELTS), Chaney is in a unique position to help coordinate efforts relating to one of Berea’s major initiatives—integrating the College’s outreach and service programs into the curriculum. Service and learning are long-standing traditions of the College, and the commitment to incorporate the two into the academic curriculum was strengthened when the CELTS program was established four years ago. In that short time, CELTS’ efforts have gained national attention. In 2003, for the second consecutive year, US News and World Report recognized Berea College as one of the nation’s best institutions for service-learning.

Dr. Meta Mendel-Reyes, CELTS director, says this recognition endorses the idea that the most effective learning occurs both in the classroom and in the community. “We are really a young center, and for us to be one of the top service-learning institutions suggests that we are seen by others as one of the national leaders,” says Mendel-Reyes. “People are realizing that service-learning is one of the most effective ways for students to learn, whatever the discipline is, and it’s one of the most important ways that a liberal arts institution can help prepare students to be not just specialists, but world citizens.”

Admittedly a hands-on person who craves opportunities to positively influence lives through her work, Chaney echoes the importance of integrating academics and service projects into the curriculum. “It’s like

a spectrum with learning at one end, and service at the other,” says Chaney, a senior majoring in Spanish and child and family studies. “The things between are what we can do to connect the service with the academics.”

In a steeply tiered classroom of 30 students in the Hafer-Gibson Nursing Building, Chaney revisits Dr. Janice Blythe’s nutrition class, a model for successfully integrating service-learning into course work. In addition to learning the requisite details of proteins, fats, carbohydrates, and vitamins, and how they balance a healthful diet, these students broadened their learning opportunities by collecting food donations for the Students for Appalachia Hunger Hurts food drive and assisting with the Oxfam Hunger Banquet.

“I not only gained knowledge in basic nutrition, but I can say that this class was essential in opening my eyes to what is really going on with hunger in the world and why these conditions exist and continue to exist,” says Chaney. “My way of thinking about nutrition and hunger has been developed by the research I did for Dr. Blythe’s class. I learned the causes of hunger, but I also learned that I can do something about these problems.”

Blythe teaches the fundamentals of nutrition with the perspective that hunger is just one of many plaguing social issues, and the process of service-learning can be applied to other social plights. “It’s a way for students to apply what they are reading and to try to connect it in such a way that it has relevance to today’s society,” says Blythe. “I never want students to be able to just memorize or regurgitate facts, but to see how those facts and details can be shaped into a larger framework to resolve real problems.”

Working with the class, Chaney affirms the notion that the most effective learning is experiential and results from the integration of academics and service projects. “There are a lot of political, economical and social issues



The Oxfam Hunger Banquet brings to life the real problem of worldwide hunger.

Participants are randomly assigned to a socioeconomic group, and are fed accordingly.

Rebecca Chaney coordinated the banquet this year.

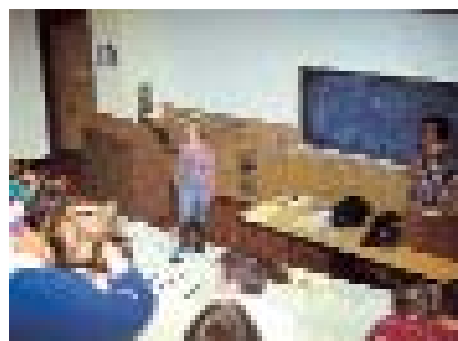
that need to be addressed to address hunger,” says Chaney. “There are a lot of other questions that the hunger issue brings up. I may have forgotten the intricate details of nutrition, but I haven’t forgotten the need to address hunger. I would not have gotten as involved or learned as much from this class if we had not completed the service project, especially the academic research we did to prepare for the hunger drive and hunger banquet.”

From her desk in the CELTS office, Chaney is currently conducting on-campus research to determine what classes in the last three years have included service-learning as a component of their course work. Although class participation is increasing, a troubling trend is emerging. While community volunteerism is high, political involvement is low, according to the Institute of Politics at Harvard University.

To help provide some insight on how to increase political involvement

among college students, Berea College is participating in the Carnegie Political Engagement Project, a 3-year effort to investigate and report on successful examples of politically involved student bodies.

“The Carnegie Political Engagement Project is actually trying to look at the relationship between service and political engagement” says Mendel-Reyes, whose course “Service, Citizenship, and Community” is one of 21 courses nationwide chosen for the Carnegie initiative. “They selected specific professors and courses they were interested in, to conduct a large study of college students’ activity in politics. Their study arose from a perception that community service is on the rise on college campuses, but participation in politics is declining.”



Dr. Janice Blythe’s nutrition class goes beyond simply the lack of food to analyze the true causes of hunger and how to effectively relieve the problem.

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Dr. Meta Mendel-Reyes' course on political engagement helps students learn how to implement real change in the world. "My goal is not so much to have them figure out what the right way to do service is, but to help them analyze problems and develop their own personal philosophy and commitment to service."

In her course, Mendel-Reyes' students practice democracy through participatory activities and during a semester-long team community based research project. Mendel-Reyes says her goal for the course and for the project is political effectiveness. "Students learn that that people at the grassroots level can make a difference by engaging in community dialogues with local leaders, and by contributing through their project."

Participation in community service projects is needed, but involvement in politics is essential to make lasting social changes, agrees Chaney. "Political changes are the most difficult to accomplish, but they are also the ones where you can get the most change," she explains. "You can educate people that they need certain things in their diet and hope they get it, or you can implement change through the political

process to ensure they are getting a proper diet."

While the goal of Blythe's nutrition class is not to answer all the questions regarding hunger, many students tackle the issues of food distribution or malnourishment with hopes of finding some answers. "We are learning the basic nutritional values that we can use in our professions," says Jessica Culver, '07, a child development major. "This is a first step for us as college students who are getting ready to go into our professional lives and learn how to be involved in our communities. It sure doesn't hurt to do something, and at least gets the ball rolling so people think a little bit further about issues like hunger or poverty. There is always more that can be done, and there will always be more than can be done."

Mendel-Reyes stresses that good service results from good learning, and students contemplate complex issues as part of the service-learning process. "On one hand, they are having this experience that makes them feel good by contributing to the families who use the food pantry (through the Hunger Hurts food drive). On the other hand, does direct service solve problems?" asks Mendel-Reyes. "How do we actually change the social problems that service is meant to address? My goal is not so much to have them figure out the right way to do service, but to help them analyze problems and develop their own personal philosophy and commitment to service."

Chaney's personal philosophy and commitment to service is passionate to the point of tears. "I came into this class and said, 'OK, there's hunger.' Then I did research, and I would be in the library crying because people were hungry," says Chaney. "I come to these classes to get people involved. I want them to see how important this is. I love it that Dr. Blythe has the service learning component in her class because that's where I got the most

out of the class. I want students to use what they're learning in class to address the bigger issues outside the classroom."

Although it may be years from now, Chaney plans to enter the political arena by organizing efforts at the grass-roots level, but first she wants to pursue an advanced degree in sociology. In the meantime, she will continue to embody Berea's institutional commitment to service-learning.

"I am fortunate to have the opportunity to attend college," says Chaney. "With my education, I must now create change in my life, my community, and in my world so that others will be able to have a chance at a better life."

During the Students for Appalachia "Hunger Hurts" Food Drive, student volunteers visit Berea homes to collect food from community members for local food banks.

