Celebrating Five Years

As we start another academic year with the excitement sparked by the back-to-school rush, I find myself looking to the future and the past.

This fall marks the fifth anniversary of the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement’s official launch at UR. Hundreds of faculty, staff, students, and community partners turned out in September 2004 to attend panels on affordable housing in Richmond, international development, and voter participation followed by a dedication ceremony that included speeches by local and national leaders on civic engagement.

The event itself signaled the CCE’s mission to bring together campus and community members in collaborative study, reflection, and action to address contemporary social issues in Richmond and the wider world. But the seeds of a vision for a center within Academic Affairs that would link student learning to community needs were sown long before the launch.

Through the leadership and dedication of Dr. Douglas A. Hicks and the work of the Rev. Dr. David D. Burhans, the Rev. Robb Moore, and other university visionaries, the CCE moved from an idea on paper to a thriving office in the heart of campus.

This fall we honor the incredible work of Doug Hicks, founding director of the CCE, who after five years of excellent leadership has returned to teaching full-time in the Jepson School of Leadership Studies.

We welcome Dr. Sylvia Gale, as the CCE’s new associate director. Sylvia brings rich experience building and sustaining campus-community partnerships, a deep knowledge of civic engagement in higher education, and a strong record of project development and administration through her previous work at the Humanities Institute at UT Austin.

John McCulla, the director of community relations, has also joined the CCE team, bringing his expertise and partnerships with the local neighborhood associations and the business community to enhance our work.

Together, the CCE team is ready to support faculty teaching community-based learning courses and undertaking community-based research, students looking to engage with the community in meaningful, educational ways, and staff eager to share their time and talents in our region. While the CCE’s history may be short, the University’s commitment to civic engagement is long, and we will strive—in accordance with the University’s new strategic plan, The Richmond Promise—to make our community engagement efforts more intentional, focused, and sustainable. Join us.

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Civic Fellows: Connecting Academics to Real-World Problems

The pace of life slows for many Americans with the onset of summer. But for 12 students awarded civic fellowships by the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement (CCE), summer 2009 marked a time of purposeful, often arduous, work on pressing social issues.

Take, for example, Guillermo Avellan, a senior from Ecuador who will graduate with a degree in economics in December 2009. Avellan spent the first month of his internship in the Ecuadorian highlands assisting local candle makers and weavers with microenterprise projects funded by the Inter-American Development Bank, a multinational bank that finances economic development in Central and South America.

He spent the next two-and-a-half months at the bank’s plush offices in Washington, D.C., providing summaries and analyses to the bank’s Ecuadorian and Chilean boards of directors to help them decide which projects to fund.

The contrast between the two worlds was not lost on Avellan. “Back in Ecuador are the needs,” he said. “Here in D.C. are the knowledge and the money. In order to help the poor in Ecuador, you must understand the local context.” Avellan’s time working with poor villagers in Ecuador helped him gain the knowledge he needed to argue their case in the boardrooms of Washington, D.C.

Like Avellan, Kendall Paine, ’10, spent the summer working with Latinos. But rather than assisting Latinos in their native countries, Paine helped recent Latino immigrants to the United States through her internship with the Hispanic Liaison Office, a social-services agency of the city of Richmond.

The leadership studies major and Latin American and Iberian studies minor relied on the Spanish-language skills she perfected during a study-abroad experience in Nicaragua. Her fluency in Spanish enabled her to answer questions for Richmond-area Latinos ranging from how to apply for food stamps or rent assistance to how to register a child for a soccer program.

“I can now put faces to the issues I’ve been reading about,” Paine said, noting that this experience raised her awareness of the challenges many Hispanics face in the United States.

Paine recalled assisting one young mother of three at the office on a recent afternoon. “She was only 17, a few years younger than I, but she already had so many responsibilities to manage. Sometimes what I can do to help is limited, and I just have to hope that they will find food to eat and their basic needs will be met.”

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Dr. Amy Howard is the executive director of the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement.

Kendall Paine, ’10, enjoyed the direct client contact she had as an intern at the City of Richmond Hispanic Liaison Office.
Matthew Wentworth, ’11, followed an unusual path to civic engagement. The president of the UR Chapter of Habitat for Humanity credited his involvement with affordable-housing advocacy in large part to a statistics course he took the fall of his sophomore year.

The son of a builder and a real-estate agent, Wentworth joined the UR Chapter of Habitat as a first-year student in fall 2007. He participated in several Habitat initiatives before the chapter fell into a period of inactivity in spring 2008.

But Wentworth, a management major, connected to housing issues again when he enrolled in Dr. Lewis A. Litteral’s introductory statistics course. Litteral divided his students into groups charged with doing statistical analysis for local nonprofits.

Wentworth and two classmates spent countless hours collecting and analyzing data for ElderHomes, a nonprofit dedicated to improving the housing and living conditions of elderly, disabled, and low-income people in central Virginia.

The hard work maximized his learning, Wentworth said. Because he was undertaking this project for an actual organization, he felt a tremendous sense of responsibility. “We needed to be accountable for this data,” Wentworth said. “We needed to get it right.”

And that’s the point, according to Litteral. In addition to assigning students statistical exercises out of a textbook, Litteral wanted students to experience the frustrations and rewards of working with real-life statistical data.

“They begin to understand the issues involved with working with data,” Litteral explained. “Sometimes data is incomplete, inaccurate, hard to find, in the wrong format, or hard to input.” And students learn to cope with that.

“When they deal with community organizations,” Litteral said, “they also get to see the fruits of their labor.”

Wentworth found the fruits of his labor particularly gratifying because ElderHome’s mission to help people remain in their homes for as long as possible resonated with him on a personal level. He had only to think of his grandmother.

His grandmother loved hosting bridge club in her historic 1865 home, Wentworth explained. But a few years ago she discontinued these get-togethers because two of her elderly friends could no longer climb the two steps to her front door. Wentworth’s father solved the problem by installing railings on either side of the steps. Bridge club resumed much to grandmother’s delight.

“I realized how much trouble my grandmother would be in if she didn’t have all her kids to help her,” Wentworth said. ElderHomes fills the gap for many elderly and disabled individuals who don’t have family or the financial resources to support them.

Wentworth’s work with ElderHomes rekindled his interest in Habitat. He set about resurrecting the campus chapter in October 2008. He recruited 25 members, and in November 2008 Wentworth was elected Habitat chapter president.

Wentworth’s decision to re-engage with Habitat pleased Litteral. “My classes have an upside reward potential they never had before I started incorporating community-based learning into the curriculum,” Litteral said. Many students leave community-based learning (CBL) classes with a deeper understanding of social issues and a commitment to get involved.

The Bonner Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) offers many resources to assist faculty members interested in creating a CBL course, Litteral said. For example, he participated in a CBL faculty-learning community coordinated by the CCE.

The CCE also provides students with resources, such as the student-programming grant it awarded to the UR Chapter of Habitat to host an affordable-housing forum this past spring. The chapter will sponsor more educational programming in the coming year as well as hands-on opportunities at local Habitat build sites, Wentworth said. And it will ramp up its fundraising efforts with the goal of undertaking a UR Chapter-sponsored build in the near future.
Other fellows echoed similar concerns about the people they encountered through their internships, including Appalachian families adversely affected by mountaintop coal mining, inner-city African-American children, and gay and transgendered individuals in need of quality health care.

Some fellows worked on grassroots advocacy to promote their favorite social-justice issues, such as the environment. Others worked behind-the-scenes doing research or accounting work for their respective nonprofits. One fellow even interned with a Philadelphia nonprofit dedicated to promoting and producing new and alternative theater.

Although the fellows’ internships were as different and varied as the fellows themselves, all involved a commitment to civic engagement and strong ties to the fellows’ respective fields of study.

Eleven of the 12 fellows received Burhans Civic Fellowships, named in honor of David D. Burhans, the University’s chaplain emeritus. The twelfth fellow, Jenna Garber, ’10, became the recipient of the inaugural Marsh Civic Fellowship, created in memory of former Meals on Wheels president and community-service advocate Deborah L. Marsh. Garber interned with the International Hospital for Children, which brings children from six developing nations in Latin America and the Caribbean to Richmond for life-saving surgeries.

The competitive Burhans and Marsh Civic Fellowships award students $4,000 each to undertake a minimum 400-hour, otherwise unpaid internship in the nonprofit or government sector. Each fellow works closely with a faculty mentor to complete reading and writing assignments that tie the internship experience back to the fellow’s academics.

“The synergy between the academic theory and the real-world internship makes for a powerful learning experience that can even be transformational,” said Cassie Price, CCE coordinator of the civic fellowships. “For some, the civic fellowship sets the course for what they decide to do with the rest of their lives.”

http://engage.richmond.edu/programs/fellowships/index.html

City Neighborhood Serves as Laboratory for Political Science Students

Not all laboratories come equipped with petri dishes and test tubes. Just ask any student enrolled in Dr. Jennifer Erkulwater’s political science course “Poverty and Political Voice” last spring.

Erkulwater had her students explore systemic poverty through reading assignments, a blog, classroom discussions, and service-learning experiences in Highland Park, a low-income inner-city neighborhood in Northside Richmond.

“I happened to be looking at a map showing concentrations of poverty in the city of Richmond one day,” Erkulwater said, “and a light bulb went off. I had the thought that using a targeted neighborhood as a ‘laboratory’ would allow my students to have a common conversation about poverty. More importantly, we could bring up sensitive issues about race and socioeconomic class in a way that would be non-judgmental and relevant.

“Students would be able to see—literally as they commuted to their sites and walked around their neighborhood—how Richmond’s past, especially regarding race, is very much alive in the policy problems we grapple with today. And they would be able to understand that poverty isn’t something separate from their own lives.”

With the help of CCE staff, students found placements in Highland Park through Build It, the University’s largest civic-engagement initiative, which is coordinated by the CCE and has built strong campus-community partnerships in Richmond’s Northside. Students focused on four issue areas: work and family life, children and schools, crime and violence, and health and the environment.

They interacted with children and their parents in an after-school tutoring and mentoring program; served as classroom aides and tutors at neighborhood schools; worked with ex-offenders and construction teams at a nonprofit dedicated to successful prisoner re-entry and neighborhood revitalization; assisted homeless individuals as they recovered from chronic illnesses and surgeries at a medical respite center; and volunteered at a city hospital.

For example, Russell Gong, ’11, learned about health care associated with substandard housing when he worked on a construction team renovating dilapidated buildings in Highland Park. “It’s important to get your hands on the issues rather than just reading about them in a textbook,” Gong said.

Daniel Colosimo, ’11, agreed. “Students at UR should be required to do some kind of community-based learning before they graduate,” Colosimo said.

At the end of the course, students gave PowerPoint presentations on their research during a class period and at a CCE Brown Bag discussion. Community partners attended both sessions and requested copies of the PowerPoint presentations for use in refining and developing their outreach programs and in writing grants.

Both community organizations and students benefited from this community-based learning course.

“The most meaningful thing I can do as a teacher is to get my students to care enough about a topic to challenge their old assumptions and seek answers to questions they pose themselves—not because I ask them to, but because they are curious about the world around them,” Erkulwater said. “This course encouraged students not to think of themselves as passive vessels getting filled with whatever I chose to pour into them, but to get out in the real world, ask questions, and struggle with the uncertainties of real life. I see service learning as a stepping-stone in that process.”

http://engage.richmond.edu/programs/cbl/index.html
Fridays, 12:30-1:25 p.m., Tyler Haynes Commons, Room 333

9/4 The Planning and Design of Richmond
Rachel Flynn, AIA, director of community development, city of Richmond

9/11 Adnan’s Voice: The Struggle to Bring Free Thought to Azerbaijan
A panel of campus and community leaders
Co-sponsored by the Office of International Education and the Collegian

9/18 Chief Justice John Marshall, the Constitution, and Leadership in the Law
Dr. Gary McDowell, professor of leadership studies, political science, and law

9/25 From Ocotitlan, Mexico, to Richmond, VA: A Filmmaker’s Quest to Understand Migratory Motivations
Jen Lawhorne, documentary filmmaker and director
Co-sponsored by the Latin@/Hispanic Heritage Month Committee

10/2 Social Entrepreneurship: How Businesses Do Well by Doing Good
Dr. Jeff Pollack, associate professor of management

10/16 Children, Loss, and Challenge in Urban Neighborhoods
Dr. Kevin Allison, associate professor and associate dean for community activities, College of Humanities and Sciences, VCU
Co-sponsored by Build It

10/23 2009 Governor’s Race: A Referendum on Washington?
Jeff Shapiro, political columnist, Richmond Times-Dispatch
*Location: Brown Alley Room*

10/30 Greening the Spider: Sustainability Initiatives at UR
Trey McDonald, UR sustainability coordinator

11/6 Dr. King’s ‘Storm Troopers of the Movement’: College Students in the Civil Rights Struggle
Dr. Wesley Hogan, associate professor of history, VSU

11/13 Guyland: A One Book, One Campus Discussion
Dr. Joe Boehman, dean, Richmond College, and Dr. Juliette Landphair, dean, Westhampton College

Information about additional fall-semester programs is available at http://engage.richmond.edu/events/calendar.html.