January 2009 marked a series of new beginnings locally and nationally. Mayor Dwight Jones and City Council members were sworn in during the first week of the year amidst mutual promises to work together. Millions of Americans braved crowded roadways and the cold to take part in Barack Obama’s historic inauguration. The president and members of Congress pledged to work across the partisan aisle as the country and the world face increasingly difficult challenges. Hope and collaboration echo as watchwords for 2009.

University of Richmond stands poised to translate these words into action. The effort and input of hundreds of faculty, staff, and students on the strategic plan point the way forward. Even as the means to achieve the goals set forth in the plan are determined, our community now has five principles to guide us: integrated academic experiences, integrated student experiences, diversity, access and affordability, and community engagement. Collaboration across schools, divisions, and departments and between the University and the metropolitan Richmond community is the key to translating this plan on paper into achievable actions. A shared vision paired with clear, measurable steps and supported by our collective work will lead UR into a bright future.

The January opening of University of Richmond Downtown signaled that UR is ready to take community engagement to the next level. By linking individual efforts in intentional ways through thoughtful, respectful collaboration on and off campus, UR, in sustained partnership with citizens, leaders, and organizations in the Richmond region, can translate hope into change. Let’s get started.

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

Taking It to the Streets

Many students suffer through courses in core subject areas in order to meet graduation requirements. Not so students in Paula Lessem’s classes for non-science majors.

Last semester, students in Lessem’s “Emerging Infectious Diseases” (BIOL 110) created teaching modules on topics ranging from the benefits of hand washing to the prevention of HIV/AIDS. Under Lessem’s supervision, her students tailored these teaching modules to different grade levels and presented them in interactive sessions to students at two area schools, Huguenot High School (a Richmond Public School) and Southside Baptist Christian School (a parochial school).

Lessem’s students learned the subject material better and found it more relevant as a result of teaching it to elementary, middle, and high school students. “This class gives non-majors a chance to talk science,” Lessem said.

And students in two underserved local schools gained an increased awareness of the importance of basic biology in their lives. “If we impact even a small number of students,” Lessem said, “we can increase science literacy in this country.”

Lessem is not alone in her efforts to integrate learning in the Ivory Tower with learning in the community. Increasingly, University of Richmond faculty members from a wide range of disciplines are experimenting with different types of community-based learning (CBL).

Some departments and schools have a long-standing history of engaging their students in CBL. Spanish-language students have been involved with the Hispanic community in Richmond for years.

Likewise, founding members of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies structured the curriculum to include increasingly complicated, challenging CBL components as students move from their first year to their senior year.

“When people think about leadership,” Dean Sandra Peart said, “they think about doing things, about effecting change.” Therefore, leadership studies must include an experiential-learning component, according to Peart.

But while certain disciplines such as Spanish and leadership studies naturally lend themselves to CBL, other disciplines can also benefit from this teaching methodology. Just ask Andy Litteral, associate professor of management in the Robins School of Business. Litteral decided to shake up his statistics course a few years ago. Instead of asking his students to solve problems in a textbook, he sent them out into the community to run statistics for local nonprofits.

“The CBL component provides students with levels of community engagement, control of their learning process, and exposure to group responsibility not available in the previous course format,” Litteral said. “In the best of cases, the students are transformed by the significance of their contribution to organizations on projects that would otherwise go untouched.”

Terry Dolson, community-based learning program manager for the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement (CCE), applauds the increased interest in CBL among faculty and points to the significant role CBL can play in the execution of the University’s new strategic plan.

“My hope is that students would have several different types of CBL experiences—service learning, field trips, projects, research, internships—in different classes before they graduate,” Dolson said. “CBL is one of the central ways for students to embrace the exciting educational opportunities beyond the Richmond bubble.”

“Students at UR should be required to do some form of community learning in order to graduate,” said Dan Colosimo, ’11, a veteran of several CBL courses. “It’s amazing!”

(Continued on page 3)
Determination in Spite of It All

When I went to Chandler Middle School in Highland Park, Richmond, Va., on Friday, September 26, 2008, to volunteer, I arrived to find the school in a tense moment. The day before an article had come out in the Richmond Times-Dispatch that foretold the failure of only two Richmond city schools, out of 48, in the accreditation process.

Chandler Middle School was one of these schools specifically named. While the article was designed to praise the city because of its success in having 46 out of 48 schools pass the statewide tests, it also highlighted discrepancies in many of the city’s schools and cast a very negative light on those schools that were failing.

The response to this article at Chandler, however, was remarkable. The students were all very distressed that their school had been named as a failure and several of them had actually written letters to the newspaper’s editor presenting the positive features of their school and the constructive changes that have been made in the past year.

Everyone was very optimistic and, at one point, the principal, Mr. Derek Mason, came into the classroom, looked over Chandler’s scores in the newspaper, and said, “If we can get this close [to passing the state standardized tests] with people who don’t want to be here, think how great we can do now that we have people who really do want to be here.” His demonstration of faith and pride in his school was the common reaction for students, faculty members, and administrators alike.

I was impressed with how determined everyone was to prove the newspaper wrong and bring their school up to its full potential. Instead of letting the articles bring them down, it made the members of the school community stronger and more unified because it gave them a purpose and a sense of pride in their school. This pride was then translated into a desire to show everyone else that they were wrong—Chandler Middle School was not, and is not, a failure, and it is a thriving and energizing communal environment.

However, aside from my surprise at the positivity generated in response to these potentially demoralizing articles, I was interested in the notion of accreditation and how this title can make or break a school.

Educational accreditation is decided on by private accreditation organizations and the intent of accreditation is to serve as a “peer review” system to see if standards are being met at schools. While unaccredited schools can enroll and teach students as well as grant degrees, these degrees may not be used when applying for civil service or other employment, and, thus, a student coming from an unaccredited school is at a severe disadvantage.

Thus, one can see why Chandler would be upset over the loss of accreditation. Currently, it is accredited with warning, meaning that if it does not pass its state standardized tests this year it could face losing its accreditation. This could result in major shifts in the administration of the school.

Several drastic changes can already be seen in the school. Just this past December Chandler adopted single-gender classes in the hopes of cutting down on distractions and improving test scores.

The Richmond Times-Dispatch article noted, “The concept [of single-gender classes] has been used at nearby Henderson Middle School, which has met state standards for the past five years while serving a student population similar in economic and demographic makeup to Chandler’s.” The article suggested that single-gender classes would be a viable and attractive solution for the failing school’s woes.

And perhaps they are. So far teachers have noted increased concentration in the male students, and they anticipate similar responses from the female students once they settle into the new routine.

However, is this the answer to Chandler’s problems? Will only a complete and total renovation of the school and how it is run “turn it around,” so to speak?

I would have to say, no—if only because of the determination and drive I have witnessed firsthand in everyone who works at that school. The students, teachers, and administrators at Chandler are working harder than ever to prove to the city that they are not failures and that they can do this.

It might be hard to grasp the determination and spirit of the school coming in as an employee of the state or as a private accreditation organization, however, as a volunteer I have seen all that Chandler is capable of and I believe that Chandler can succeed.

Julia Czech, ’11, a leadership studies major, has been volunteering as a classroom aide at Chandler Middle School for the past two years through Build It, the University’s largest civic-engagement initiative coordinated by the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement. This year, Czech is a member of the Action Group, the Build It student leadership team. Czech wrote this op-ed on Dec. 10, 2008. An article in the Richmond Times-Dispatch on Feb. 3, 2009, reported that the Richmond Public School Board received a recommendation from superintendent Yvonne Brandon to close Chandler Middle School in response to poor standardized test scores and the need for budget cuts. The specifics of how the Chandler students will be reassigned to other RPS schools have yet to be worked out.

Speaking of Books…

Join CCE executive director Doug Hicks from 12:30-1:30 p.m., Friday, Feb. 20, 2009, in the Think Tank, second floor of the Commons, as he discusses his latest book, With God on All Sides: Leadership in a Devout and Diverse America.

Free pizza will be provided and Hicks will be on hand to sign copies of his book in the UR bookstore immediately following this CCE Brown Bag.

Students: Check out summer funding for research projects and nonprofit internships at www.engage.richmond.edu.

Richmond Times-Dispatch
Bonner Scholar, Burhans Fellow Receives International Education Award

Kate Simma, ’09, discovered her passion for international women’s rights while working with Mayan women in the Guatemalan Highlands the summer after her sophomore year. The political science major and history minor from Texas had learned about some of the challenges facing the indigenous hill people of Guatemala through her Bonner Scholar service her sophomore year with the Highland Support Project (HSP), a Richmond-based nonprofit serving the Mayan communities of Guatemala through transformational development projects.

She subsequently chose to fulfill her summer Bonner service hours by working on the ground in the Guatemalan Highlands for HSP. Although she did not speak Spanish (Simma was studying Italian at the time), she took a Spanish immersion course the first week she arrived in Guatemala and continued to improve her grasp of the language through weekly private tutoring sessions for the remainder of her stay. A significant aspect of her work with the Mayan women focused on domestic violence and mental health issues, Simma said.

Simma had a very different kind of international experience the fall of her junior year when she studied Italian language, theater, and opera in Perugia, Italy. When she returned to campus for spring semester, she again worked with the Richmond office of HSP, this time serving as a translator on the spring service-learning trip to Guatemala.

A Burhans Civic Fellowship awarded by the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement enabled Simma to return to Latin America the summer after her junior year. This time she worked in the poorest neighborhood in Asunción, Paraguay, helping women to develop a jewelry microenterprise business that would increase their financial independence. She also taught English to the neighborhood children.

On Tuesday, Feb. 10, 2009, the Office of International Education awarded Simma the International Education Student Award in recognition of the comprehensive international education she has pursued through her curricular and co-curricular experiences while a student at the University of Richmond.

With graduation only a few months away, Simma continues to look for opportunities in the international arena. She has applied for a Carole Weinstein Grant to work with a nongovernmental organization in Sierra Leone this summer setting up malaria nets. She has also applied for a Fulbright teaching fellowship in either Peru or Ecuador for spring 2010.

“All my international experiences have inspired me to work in the field of international women’s rights,” Simma said. “Women are the building blocks of society. If they are not given adequate health care, education, and food, how can they change society for the better?”

With the benefit of a rich international education, Simma is one woman who can, and undoubtedly will, change society for the better.
bonner center for civic engagement

cc e brown bag discussion series

Fridays, 12:30-1:25 p.m. in the Think Tank, 2nd Floor Commons

1/16 Birmingham Children: Growing Up in the Civil Rights Struggle
Dr. Gill Hickman, Leadership Studies, and Dr. Del McWhorter, Philosophy and Women’s Studies
An MLK Day program

1/23 Post-Soul President: Barack Obama’s Dreams from My Father and the Post-Soul Aesthetic
Dr. Bert Ashe, English and American Studies

1/30 David D. Burhans Civic Fellows
Two students discuss their summer experiences as Burhans Civic Fellows

2/6 Managing Dissent: Rhetoric and the Unruly Veteran of War
Dr. Paul Achter, Rhetoric and Communication Studies

2/13 Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights
Cosponsored by One Book, One Campus

2/20 With God on All Sides: Religion in American Leadership
Dr. Doug Hicks, Leadership Studies and Religion, Executive Director, CCE

2/27 Speak Out: Gender on Our Campus
A discussion led by Dr. Thad Williamson, Leadership Studies, and students
Cosponsored by Women Involved in Living and Learning (WILL)

3/20 Engaging the Invisible Amazonian: Conservation, Development, and Indigenous People
Dr. David Salisbury, Geography and Environmental Science

3/27 Kids Count: How Government Programs and Nonprofits Are Making the Grade
Community speaker
Cosponsored by Alpha Phi Omega

4/3 Highland Park: Investigating the Effects of Inequality in One Richmond Neighborhood
Dr. Jennifer Erkulwater, Political Science, and students
Cosponsored by Build It

4/10 Brown @ 55: Fulfilling the Promise
Panel of scholars and community leaders
Cosponsored by the Richmond Families Initiative

Information about additional spring-semester programs is available at engage.richmond.edu.