



# The bridge that Community Service- Learning built

The experiences that link service to learning  
also link JMU to the community

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TWENTY YEARS AGO TWO VISIONARY EDUCATORS SEIZED A chance to launch a program at James Madison University that would entwine the institution with its community, transform its students into enlightened citizens and put world-changing opportunities within the grasp of scores of young people. Since its inception, community service-learning has become a special part of the Madison Experience, an avenue of learning with dynamic impact.





THE MID-1980S WERE NOT THE FIRST or last time JMU's administrators would put an emphasis on finding innovative ways to shape the educational process, but it would prove to be a watershed period in terms of the university's mission, spirit and enduring value epitomized by community service-learning.

In 1985 as the university reviewed its general education program, "there was an emphasis on innovation, doing new things," says Ann Myers, head of JMU's Department of Social Work. While Madison students had long had a history of volunteer service in the local community, Myers, a social work professor at the time, and sociology professor Cecil Bradfield saw an opportunity to develop a program that had at its core a value near and dear to their hearts. "Both of us had a very strong commitment to the idea that a university needed to have involvement in the community," she says.

According to Bradfield, now retired after 30 years of service at JMU, community service-learning had a very humble beginning at Madison. "We wrote a paragraph about institutionalizing students across the university in service learning," he says. Those few words were reviewed by a subcommittee evaluating new university initiatives. The modest proposal for a Center for Service-Learning was accepted. "We were given a storage room in Warren Campus Center, an 8- by 10-foot room with a desk and a telephone," says Bradfield.

He and Myers were also given reassigned time to coordinate the center and work with JMU faculty members to

develop a program. "We measured our success early on by how many square feet we had," Bradfield says with a laugh. "We went from 80 to 150 the next year. By the third year we had a space with two rooms," he says.

And so, in the spring of 1988, JMU's pilot service-learning program began. "There were about six agencies and 75 students in the program, and we just continued to grow," says Myers.

The early growth was a reflection of hard work on the part of Bradfield and Myers. Although each professor had worked with community agencies in volunteer efforts, they now faced a new challenge — introducing a formal program that established and integrated course and learning objectives into community service. "The difference with service learning is the connection that is made with very specific courses and concepts. While volunteer and community service are highly valued, there is little benefit to students in terms of their academic application of concepts to courses unless someone is helping them make that connection," says Myers.

They worked to build a solid balance of service, educational achievement and community involvement. "We immediately brought people at various agencies into the system as community mentors, emphasizing that they were part of the educational process," says Bradfield.

He and Myers had to work on another crucial component of the service-learning equation. "Ann and I developed and did workshops for faculty members," Bradfield explains. Their workshops helped professors focus on their individual course objectives and demonstrated the learning value that community service would contribute to those objectives.

The finely tuned equation yielded powerful results; and over the ensuing years, service learning became increasingly engrained in the Madison culture. There is no doubt of

**CS-L Director Rich Harris ('77), left, and a student co-leader work to repair a roof during a Katrina Relief trip in Mississippi in May 2006.**





**(l-r): JMU students supported Hurricane Katrina relief during the Hope Floats Relief Effort; students pass time while waiting in line to sign up for Alternative Spring Break trips, and social work professor Hyong Yeom and her family coach a student in a practice counseling session.**



its critical value in the education of students according to current Community Service-Learning Director Rich Harris ('77). "I've been in higher education now for over 20 years, taking out-of-class experiences and connecting them back to classroom learning to have that learning come alive. In my other experiences, whether organizational development or Outward Bound, the out-of-class experience is a metaphor for life. You apply the metaphor to what you're doing. With service learning, it *is* life. Students really work with nonprofits, people and real issues."

The power of community service-learning is evidenced in the hyphen — "the hyphen represents the bridge between service and learning, which are equally important," says Harris. Carrying the metaphor further, the Madison CS-L office itself is often a connector, acting like a bridge between ideas and reality, between people who want to help and the organizations that need that help. "This office can make ideas happen. Our skill is bringing people and groups together," says Harris. The bridge of service learning has forged a dynamic, enduring relationship between the university and the surrounding community.

Harris credits CS-L founders Bradfield and Myers with the vision to see the community as a full partner in the learning experience. "So often higher ed sees a community as a laboratory to teach students something. When that teaching experience is over, educators and students go back to the university," he says.

Bradfield and Myers had a more familial approach.

"They wanted to be at the table with the community, hear what the problems were, what the strengths were and really be a part of building those strengths and addressing those problems," says Harris. Students were to be full partners and colleagues in the process, and as the community offered itself as an educational partner, learning came alive for hundreds of Madison students.

Today, scores of community programs reflect the power of JMU's service-learning equation. Madison students assist the elderly in retirement homes and engage them in meaningful activities at community centers. Other students work with children and adults with disabilities in a variety of settings and activities. Public health and environmental efforts are fueled by JMU students who provide support in widely varied arenas, from technological assistance to help with small-scale sustainable farming operations. Madison students work at homeless shelters, thrift stores and food banks. They tutor neighborhood children. They mentor immigrant workers with the difficult task of assimilating into a new culture. A typical example of the positive difference made through the community service-learning office is that "a large percentage of Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Harrisonburg and Rockingham County are JMU students or alumni in the area," says Harris, noting that the partnership "allows a level and quality of service that otherwise would not be possible."

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**Civic engagement opportunities are many and varied through JMU's Community Service-Learning. Clockwise (l-r): JMU students work with children with disabilities, participate in Katrina Relief trips and spend Alternative Spring Break at Patch Adams' Gesundheit Institute in West Virginia.**



There is a benefit to JMU as well. Harris sees community service-learning as essential to the fulfillment of the ultimate mission of the university — preparing students to be educated and enlightened citizens. The three goals of service learning are to connect service to the classroom, to help students grow interpersonally and personally, and to affect a lifelong commitment to service and civic engagement. Community service-learning can be key to the metamorphosis of a student into a community member who will make life in his or her neighborhood and, maybe on a larger scale, “better for everybody,” says Harris.

The three-pronged CS-L mission is a powerful dynamic that aims to cultivate the person within as well as contribute to community progress. CS-L's Alternative Spring Break and Alternative Thanksgiving Break programs have lit the fire for service to others in many Madison hearts, giving students the chance to work with communities throughout the nation and abroad. “How I got involved with community service-learning seems somewhat random,” says the program's graduate assistant Emily Schrecker ('08, '09M), “but it just goes to show how a small, seemingly insignificant event can change one's whole life.” Schrecker's twin sister, Katie ('08), had told her about the program. “I rolled the idea around in my head for a while and decided to stop by [CS-L's office] at about 3:55 p.m. on the day that the lottery [for participation] closed at 4 p.m.,” she says. Her off-the-cuff response began a “journey that has yet to end,” says Schrecker, who has been on six service trips both as a participant and leader. While anticipating her upcoming career in elementary school classrooms, she's also evaluating service in AmeriCorps and other service-learning venues.

In fact, “some students make career decisions based on

what happens in the community [experiences],” says Myers. That is what happened to Jordanna Spencer ('03). “My second year at JMU, I heard about the Alternative Break Program. I was very intrigued about the opportunity to travel with fellow JMU students,” she says. Working with the youth of a subsidized neighborhood in Winter Park, Fla., was a voyage of self-discovery for Spencer. “I felt the difference one person can make,” she says. “The Office of Community Service-Learning is the root of my development and deeply found love of service. Without this program and JMU, I would never have come to discover the gifts of serving globally and locally and the importance of both. Whenever I'm asked about my reasons for joining the Peace Corps and being passionate about service and humanity, I always begin by saying, ‘It all started when I went on this alternative break trip in college,’” says Spencer.

**The CS-L experience has launched scores of young men and women into the Peace Corps and other humanitarian efforts. “My years of working in Community Service-Learning while at JMU from 1996 to 1999 directly affected my entire future,” says Jordan Mallah ('99). “While at CS-L, I participated and led multiple service trips, including trips to Uganda, Ghana and Dominica. Each experience ... filled me with gratitude for all of my blessings,” says Mallah, who**

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went on to serve with the Peace Corps in Peru. Today, as the founder of Steadfast Freedom Yoga, Mallah teaches people to “live fully from their heart and celebrate life.”

Life-altering service-learning experiences point back to the kernel of wisdom imparted by the original center’s founder, Bradfield. “I always wanted my students to see that they were privileged. I would tell them that as a graduate of James Madison University they were probably in a one or two percent minority of privilege in the world.” To Bradfield, privilege imposed a responsibility to care for others not so privileged. “I wanted my students to live life in such a way that they thought about improving the life chances of the other 98 percent of people in the world,” he says.

Bradfield’s desire has been realized. Warren Passin (’98), who now works for Macro International on HIV prevention projects for the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, is a prime example. On his first CS-L experience, an Alternative Service Break trip, Passin says he had “the opportunity to experience and put a face to deep-seated social and structural issues such as poverty, racism and teen pregnancy, which gave me a better sense of the world I live in. I learned more about my life and how fortunate I was. ... After the trip I knew that I wanted to devote and focus my life on bettering, in some small way, the world I live in.”

Schrecker, Spencer, Mallah and Passin are a few of the many JMU graduates for whom a CS-L experience was a springboard to further service. In 2008, James Madison University retained its No. 14 place for the second consecutive year in the Peace Corps’ top 25 list for large colleges and universities with alumni serving the corps. Madison was previously ranked among medium-size colleges and universities, and JMU held No. 2 and No. 4 places in 2006 and 2005, respectively. According to Harris, JMU is a place where “students develop a desire to affect positive change.”

True to its goals, community service-learning has a profound impact on the inner person. A marked growth in confidence is evident as students engage in service learning. “The more experience you have connecting theory with reality, the better prepared you are. It helps you develop critical thinking,” says Myers. Perhaps one of the most important lessons learned by students through community service is the clarification of who they are. “Service learning helps you look at your personal values, societal values and the ethics of whatever profession you decide to go into,” says Myers. “That helps clarify a lot about what you believe. When dilemmas present in your chosen field of study or career path, the reflection that is integral to service learning provides you with more experience to face them,” says Myers.

As the Office of Community Service-Learning celebrates its 20th anniversary, the founders note that JMU’s administration has played a key role in making the office and its mission a university institution.

“We have been blessed to have the support of the administrators,” says Bradfield. “Early on, university administrators said ‘show us what you’re doing, and the resources will follow.’”

**CS-L’s service experiences launch many students into humanitarian efforts. Here, a student sweeps construction debris during a Katrina relief trip.**

And they were true to their words. The university made service learning a budget line item and gave the program office space; grants supplemented the effort. These administrative decisions gave permanence to service learning, a fact Bradfield proudly points to. As a national model program for service learning, Bradfield and his team led workshops around the country. “People would come up to us and say ‘JMU has what we want, but we’re probably not going to get it,’” says Bradfield.

That administrative commitment and the program’s enduring benefits to students and the community have been a source of continued pride for its founders. “I think the thing that I am proudest of is that it still exists. That I helped plant some seeds, and other people have come in and helped those seeds continue to grow,” says Myers. It is much the same with Bradfield: “It is very satisfying to have helped start a program that not only survives without you, but thrives. That’s what has happened here.”

Last year, community service-learning helped nearly 1,900 students participate in service experiences, facilitated 34 Alternative Break Program trips and partnered with 117 organizations directly and many more in auxiliary capacities. Extrapolating the total numbers from its 20-year history, however, is not what is important. In many ways, numbers are inadequate when measuring the impact of service learning. What is important is that the bridge that community service-learning built is certain to carry many more Madison students into lives where they will be the change, making their communities and the world better for everyone. ■

