OUTSIDE THE BOOKS

By Mary Ann Travis
Illustrations by Mike Henry
Portrait photography by Jackson Hill
Tulane pioneers a public-service graduation requirement that takes learning outside the classroom and appeals to the desire of the millennial generation to make a difference.
Psychology textbooks used to have a gap in them. They left out the "normative" experience of African American adolescence.

Books talked only about pathology among the black youth population, says Michael Cunningham, associate professor of psychology.

But Cunningham knew better. As an undergraduate student-teaching elementary-school children, he'd seen that "most kids don't have all these horrible experiences." He set out to do basic research that would change what textbooks say.

What Cunningham experienced at the beginning of his academic career—although he didn't call it that at the time—was service learning.

Now all Tulane full-time undergraduate students have the opportunity to be transformed through service learning—as Cunningham was—by fulfilling the university's new public-service graduation requirement. Tulane is the first national research university to institute such a requirement.

Service learning "provides opportunities for students to expand their boundaries, challenge their assumptions about the world and its people, and think about how they, as educated individuals, can use their knowledge and skills in ways that make the world a better place," says Andrew Furco, a professor at the University of California—Berkeley and a consultant to Tulane on the implementation of the public-service graduation requirement.

The National Commission on Service Learning defines service learning as "a teaching and learning approach that integrates community service with academic study to enrich
learning, teach civic responsibility and strengthen communities."

Cunningham says, simply, "Service learning brings abstract things to life."

**DECISION BY STORM**

The Katrina factor is huge.

"Quite frankly, we realized that we were potentially coming out of the storm with a stigma," says Ana Lopez, senior associate provost and associate professor of communication.

Lopez huddled with Tulane President Scott Cowen and other university leaders in a Houston hotel in September 2005 in the immediate aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. The leaders made the bold decision to reinvent Tulane in order to save it.

The post-storm restructuring of the university built on the university's strengths. Tulane would be smaller and more focused but stronger and take an active role in the rebuilding of New Orleans.

In the process of evaluating what was best about Tulane, Lopez says the Tulane leaders looked at service learning—a program popular and effective, but optional at Tulane pre-Katrina. "We said, here is a perfect opportunity to show how the new Tulane is going to produce a different kind of student."

Service learning taps into the yearnings of the "millennial generation"—the generation of Americans born after 1980.

"These millennial students characterize themselves as wanting to make a difference," says Lopez. "And they want to make a difference now—not when they're 60."

As New Orleans goes, so goes Tulane. And vice-versa. After the storm, Tulane in New Orleans is a place where one can make a difference.

Lopez says she could tell that the students entering Tulane in fall 2006 "really wanted to be here. They talked their parents into coming here. And part of what attracted them was the public-service requirement, the commitment to engagement. This allows them to actually see if they can make a difference."

**CELL BY CELL**

"Students' eyes light up when they talk about seeing things out in the community," says Carol Burdsal.

Burdsal is associate professor of cell and molecular biology and associate dean of undergraduate studies for the Tulane School of Science and Engineering. She teaches "Molecular Biology of Cancer" to upper-level cell and molecular biology majors.

Students taking the course often have plans to go to medical school. In previous years, Burdsal has integrated service learning into the course by having the students volunteer at an oncology ward at a local hospital.

The students protect the patients' anonymity while doing case studies based on the patient's particular type of cancer and treatments they were receiving. Students explored the mechanisms involved when cells become cancerous and how drugs treatments work.

Learning about cancerous cells in an actual hospital setting made the academic class material much more relevant to the students, says Burdsal.

But not content to repeat the same thing over and over, Burdsal has found a new service-learning project for fall 2007. Her students will work with the Louisiana Bucket Brigade. The brigade is a public-awareness group that provides air-sampling buckets to people living in an area—the notorious Cancer Alley—where petrochemical and other companies might be releasing carcinogens and contaminating the air. The sensors allow individuals and community groups to gather data about exposure to harmful carcinogens.

Burdsal's students will help the Bucket Brigade write a community-health handbook to distribute to people in Saint Bernard Parish, La., where the brigade is active.

The project ties into the biology of cancer course but from a different angle. In the Bucket Brigade project, students will learn in a real-life setting about the sources of chemical mutagenesis and how chemicals and exposure to carcinogens can trigger cancer.

Burdsal says service learning is worth the time and energy she's put into it. "The first time you do it, it is extra effort but if you find the right service activity that fits with your class, then it enhances it and makes it stronger."

Burdsal thinks the public-service graduation requirement at Tulane will elevate service learning to an accepted part of a university education—like math competency or the language requirement. It
will be added to students’ vocabulary as a building block in their education.

“Students are going to see service as a basic thing that they add to their repertoire. It will be part of what they learn to do in their college education—and hopefully they will carry that with them.”

**WORLD BEYOND CAMPUS**

Students participating in service learning gain a sense of the diversity and complexity of the world beyond the Tulane campus and beyond their pre-college experiences, says Jimmy Huck, assistant director and graduate studies adviser for the Stone Center for Latin American Studies at Tulane.

Huck has long used service learning in his courses, working with community partners such as the Hispanic Apostolate of the Archdiocese of New Orleans and after-school programs to arrange for Tulane students to tutor or teach English.

Huck oversees the “Introduction to Latin American Studies” course and has incorporated service learning as a fundamental element of the curriculum.

Every semester more than 200, usually first-year, students take the introductory Latin American studies course through one of eight sections. Students can opt to go into the community and write essays reflecting on their experiences related to the course’s general themes—land, welfare, creativity, exchange and encounter.

Huck says he’s often surprised at the sophistication of the students’ essays as they link their community experiences with their scholarly reading assignments. Through the rather mundane task of tutoring, the students make creative connections with the academic topics.

“They are learning from their community experiences about Latin America in ways that I never would have expected them to—in ways that I never could have taught them in the class,” says Huck.

Students begin to understand different realities in different cultures—and that is Huck’s aim all along.

At Tulane and similar institutions of higher education, Huck has observed a disconnect between the learning environment in the university and the reality just across the street. “I always felt that it was important to bridge the gap. And service learning is a way to do that,” he says.

Through service learning, “intellectual growth is not disconnected from the reality of the world around you.”

Students can’t help but intellectually question authority and scrutinize the methods by which information is obtained. They read journal articles and books and compare the findings of the
authors with what they've witnessed in the community. They are prompted to ask what drives the research, says Huck.

"No teacher wants students to think that a book is the be-all and end-all—that they only digest it, regurgitate it and accept it as gospel truth. Part of the intellectual and academic college experience is to become a critical thinker, to look at data and say, OK, that makes sense but is it the whole story? What's missing out of it? What can be challenged here?"

Huck believes Tulane is on the road to profound change as its graduates become more civically engaged and the community more involved in educating the students. "Most of our students have things to offer the community and want to be good citizens. And this translates into a different level of appreciation and respect for Tulane as an institution," he adds.

OUT OF THE BUBBLE

A common way of conceptualizing a university campus is as a "bubble." The protective bubble may be considered geographic, intellectual or social.

But for Tulane students, the bubble has been pierced, says Vicki Mayer, associate professor and chair of the communication department.

Students are coming to Tulane thinking that those walls are already either porous or do not exist.

"And that is a huge change," says Mayer. "That Tulane graduates have a conception of their education as not just about them but about the community at large is a different way of seeing education."

The educational experience at Tulane is unlike what students can get anywhere else, says Mayer. "They will get an education that is integrated with community needs from the get-go."

Mayer is the author of Producing Dreams, Consuming Youth: Mexican Americans and Mass Media (Rutgers, 2003), and she has done community service and activism as part of her research for the last decade, studying media consumption and community video.

She finds it exciting that her teaching, research and service "pair up so incredibly nicely" with the public-service graduation requirement.

As part of service learning for her course "Alternative Journalism," Mayer's students have written and published articles in an international publication—Social Policy.

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Jimmy Huck, assistant director for the Stone Center for Latin American Studies
Headquartered in New Orleans, Social Policy is sponsored by ACORN (Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now), a community organization dedicated to social justice and stronger communities.

Partnering with Social Policy is "the perfect marriage between learning how to do non-mainstream forms of journalism and journalistic practice and serving a community nonprofit that needs reporters and wants to capture community voices and make stories about them," says Mayer.

This summer, Mayer and Lopez, who took a short leave from her provost office duties, went to Brazil to teach summer school courses to a group of Tulane students in an international setting. The students had the opportunity to do service learning, working with Brazilian university students to produce a community video.

Talking about ideas is fine but until ideas are put into a practical setting, they aren’t retained and don’t become integrated into basic knowledge, Mayer contends.

She says, "The ideal educational setting is not one in which theory and skills are considered two separate nodes of learning but one in which they are completely integrated into each other, so that we can’t actually even tell the difference between them. If we think about theory and practice separately, to me that’s not learning."

RESILIENCY IN REAL LIFE

Cunningham, the psychology professor, continues to conduct community-based research focused on adolescent psychology. He has published peer-reviewed journal articles and book chapters, including a chapter in Educating African American Males: Voices From the Field (Corwin Press, 2005), changing old ideas about the resiliency and vulnerability of children of color in urban school settings.

In his college teaching, Cunningham early on introduced service learning to his students. Although that’s not what he called it. "I called it ‘participant observation experience,’” he says.

He has sent his Tulane students into New Orleans public schools to tutor and to retiree homes to get to know the life stories of elderly African Americans.

The students see real-life examples of adolescent behavior and reflect on issues such as abstract thinking and egocentrism in the teenage population. They gain firsthand knowledge of the structural and socioeconomic barriers to success in urban schools. They observe the common things all children experience as they go through puberty.

Cunningham’s students sometimes pursue legal careers, where they may change public policy. Or they go into social services, education or business. Or they may follow Cunningham’s path to graduate study and research in psychology.

Whatever the endeavor, he expects they will better understand American society because of their service-learning experiences.

And now all Tulane students have the opportunity to leave the bubble and connect what they’ve learned in books with their lives as citizens of the world.

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MOVING FORWARD

Sending Tulane students off campus to serve and learn is no small undertaking.

Just ask Vincent Illustre, executive director of the Center for Public Service:

"It's all tied around logistics," he says.

The center provides service-learning training and logistical support for faculty, students and community partners—the key constituents of service learning.

Center staff members offer workshops, seminars, one-on-one assistance and transportation to the community sites. The center also is in the process of developing a database of community agencies so that faculty members can easily find community partners to match their service-learning course needs.

All Tulane full-time undergraduates, beginning with the class that entered in fall 2006, must meet the two-tiered public-service graduation requirement. Before they complete their sophomore year, students have to take one 100- to 300-level service-learning course. And in the second half of their Tulane undergraduate career they must participate again in service learning, either through a higher-level service-learning course, an internship, a capstone project or an honors thesis.

During 2006-07, 415 of the 880 first-year students at Tulane took a service-learning course, and they had almost 100 service-learning courses from which to choose.

As the Tulane undergraduate population increases post-storm (nearly 1,400 first-year students are entering in fall 2007) and all students must meet the public-service requirement, Illustre forecasts that 100 to 120 service-learning courses will be needed every semester.

"We're relying on faculty to provide students opportunities to meaningfully engage in the community through their service-learning courses," says Illustre.

So far, Illustre is happy with the progress. "Our faculty are very engaged and interested in service learning. As always, they have risen to the challenge and are showing great leadership."

Tulane has been assigned 25 AmeriCorps VISTA (Volunteers in Service to America) personnel for next year to work with the university and its community partners to determine needs and best courses of action. VISTA is a federally funded national and community service program.

But Tulane also is searching outside New Orleans for service-learning opportunities. International projects are in the works, including the communication courses offered in Brazil this summer and an excursion to India as part of social-work service learning for graduate and undergraduate students. Service learning in South Africa linked to an English course also is planned.

It may have taken a disaster like Katrina to speed up the service-learning momentum at Tulane, but the New Orleans rebuilding effort alone will not sustain it.

"We're looking beyond Katrina," Illustre says. "This is a long-term project, and 10 years from now, when everything is back to normal and better, we will offer meaningful community engagement for our students."