TRANSCRIPT

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Does anyone know what these little black spots are?

Today on Across the Fence college students go outside the classroom for hands-on learning and real world situations are going to find out the partnerships and service learning opportunities for students at the University of Vermont. Good afternoon and thanks for joining us; I am Judy Simpson. When Tropical Storm Irene devastated Vermont, University of Vermont students were there to help and learn. Response was part of the service learning class at UVM, one of dozens offered each year and immensely popular among students. At its core, service learning includes meaningful partnerships between students and the community, and learning that address a community need. Across the Fence’s Rebecca Gollin tells us more.

Getting a college education requires effort and dedication. It’s not exactly a walk in the park. Except for sometimes – when it is…

Kristen Bousquet/Class of 2012 - “It’s called natural history of Centennial Woods, so it’s all about how the woods has functioned over a span of forever, and how we treat it and how it’s used today…”

Teage O’Connor/ Instructor, Natural History of Centennial Woods - “We cover whatever is going on, whatever is most alive in the woods at that time, and it changes year to year, but it also changes week to week,”

Instructor Teage O’Connor has been offering the Natural History of Centennial Woods for 3 years. The class is field based, taking place almost entirely in the Centennial Woods - 65 acres of forest, wetland and meadows owned by UVM and located right next to campus.

O’ Connor - “The learning while you're in the field and while you're engaging your sense of sight, your sense of smell, taste, we eat stuff, we brought lighters out and we burnt birch bark… So we engage all these different senses, and it I think offers more surface area and more hooks to make that learning stick a little bit longer…”
Bousquet - “In one of the very very first classes we followed Wool Pullery Brook, a watershed from the airport all the way back down to basically here, almost here, and just to see how the woods have changed in function and we've also, we've looked at old property lines, and that was once farming areas in the 1800's (0:01:35.4) and where houses are now in Burlington that owned Centennial Woods and how the woods have been impacted by development and things like that.”

A number of other UVM classes and students already use the woods on a regular basis; O’Connor says that he wants to give students the chance for a deeper connection.

O’ Connor – “There's a lot of classes that already come out here and they'll do stream ecology, they'll look at the trees for a dendrology class, but nobody was studying the woods itself. They were just using it as a learning lab, so I wanted to offer up a space to study it, connect with it, and just enjoy it.”

The diverse ecosystem in the woods offers up a wide range of plants and animals for study.

O’ Connor – “Last year we had a breeding pair of fishers that are here, there are 4 beavers that are here, there are moose that wander through, there are coyote reports all the time, there used to be black bear here, but there’s a little too much development now we get great blue herons, wood frogs singing, grey tree frogs singing, toads singing…”

Sam Hubert/ Class of 2013 - “It’s really just a very holistic approach to looking at the woods, like you're looking at the ecology, the biology, we did a class on like, glaciers and geology, and then you're also looking at like the human effect of it.”

It’s that human effect that the class spends a lot of time thinking about – both the effect others have had on the area, and the effect the students will have.

Bousquet – “A service learning class is a class that through it you do a project that benefits the community, and you kind of learn through your service, so we’re learning about the woods while we're helping people kind of come into the woods, it’s all about how you can connect to your community through a class, or through UVM, but also through something a lot larger.”

Carrie Williams Howe/ Community- University Partnerships & Service Learning – “Service learning, by definition is a form of experiential learning, it’s a way for students to learn by doing hands on work that is really engaging outside of the classroom in projects.”

O’ Connor - “I wanted students to be able to, over the course of the semester, wander around, experience all these different places, and I wouldn't tell them, 'oh hey there should be a bridge here' but we'd walk over and we'd get our feet wet or we'd slip and slide on the mud, and the students over time would go 'hey, we should have a bridge here' and so, sort of, projects developed out of that.”

Rebecca Gollin/ Across the Fence – “In a service learning class like this one, getting hands-on is part of the curriculum. The students worked in groups on projects right here at Centennial Woods, ranging from leading neighbors on field walks and improving paths in the park, to studying the local wildlife.”

Hubert –“I've kind of taken over the beaver feeding, …they come out like clockwork at 5 o clock, and you get like closer every time, and now they'll just like come right up and take it out of my hand, and so that’s been really cool, seeing the effect I have on it and kind of researching why we want beavers here,
because they promote all sorts of different life by creating habitat for them, so it’s just been cool to get to know them.”

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O’Connor - “There is a different language that is being spoken in these woods, and if you're not learning to speak that language, you're missing out on what things they are trying to tell you, whether it's the robin that lives right outside your door, or the Norway maple that was planted 35 years ago…”

Whether sharing their knowledge with community members, or building a bridge over muddy paths, the advantages of learning through service will resonate long after the class is over - with benefits for the students, the community, and the woods.

Hubert – “A lot of people don’t even know we have this natural area and tons of other natural areas that UVM owns... 0:08:43.4 - it’s just like, raising awareness for it, and that, in turn, educates people about how to use it properly…”

Bousquet – “To get to know the woods is a very powerful tool in teaching others about it.”

From learning about the woods to teaching about them, these UVM students are making the world their classroom. In Burlington, I’m Rebecca Gollin with Across the Fence.

Thanks Rebecca. Joining me now are two guests Carrie Williams Howe is the Director of UVM'S Community Partnerships and Service Learning (CUPS) Program and Kelly Hamshaw is a UVM alum, who's involved with service learning classes as an undergraduate, and has since been a service learning community partner and instructor at UVM and elsewhere. Thanks so much for being with us. In the video Carrie maybe you could talk a little bit about how service learning courses developed because in the video we saw this is an outdoor course in the woods but there a lot of other woods as well.

Carrie.: Absolutely. One of the roles are office plays is really helping to catalyze service learning courses so that could either be either community organization coming to the university and say we have a project we think would work well with the class or could be a faculty member who saying they'd like to incorporate service learning into my class. We helped bring those people together and find ways to work it into the curriculum of a class such that it makes sense.

Judy.: Can you give me some examples?

Carrie.: Sure absolutely. A lot of people can easily picture service learning happening and social work classes or community development classes or natural resources like the song video because it seems like those are naturally field based other classes such as history classes or statistics classes that are doing service learning. For example we have a statistics professor who regularly engages with nonprofits to help them to develop surveys or to analyze data that they have because they might be needing to evaluate their programs. Or the history classes that work with museums or with special collections at libraries so it really is happening in a lot of diverse disciplines across the university.

Judy.: How is this different from volunteering?
Carrie.: We think of volunteering and service learning an internship so along the spectrum of ways students can engage with the community but there are two questions you can ask to differentiate them and that's what's the focus and who's the beneficiary. In volunteering you're very much focused often on what are we doing for the community and how are we getting the project done that's going to benefit the community. In an internship you might be more focused on what is the student learning and what kind of professional skills are they gaining from this experience? In service learning we're trying to find a balance between those things and equally focus on what is the community getting out of it and what is the student learning. So students are really engaged in processing their experience so it meets the learning goals of course our program that their involved with.

Judy.: So Kelly you have experienced various facets of service learning. How did that affect what you did after graduation?

Kelly.: I think service learning gave me the opportunity to get out to the community right away. As I was learning in the classroom it gave me the opportunity to apply that to real world community issues. Just as far as giving me out of Burlington and to communities that college students don't normally get to visit very often and working with community partners really brought a lot of relevance to my education. It heavily impacted what I was getting at UVM.

Judy.: What were some of the projects that you worked on?

Kelly.: One of the projects that I worked on led to my current position at UVM's as a researcher was working with mobile home park communities in Starksboro, a town in Addison County. We're working with park communities to help them do community organizing and community planning and working with the mobile home project at the Champlain Valley Office Economic Opportunity gave us that real world connection and actually some of my classmates have gone on to current staff positions with that organization as a result of their service learning.

Judy.: What do you think for today's undergraduates are taking away from their service learning classes?

Kelly.: I think they are getting a chance to get out there and see how complex the world really is. When we're in the classroom theory can be kind of bland perhaps but when you're really out there seeing things unfold in front of you and having the opportunity to directly impact what's going on in your community it gives them that ah ha moment that I can make a difference. I hope that fuels their commitment to civic engagement going forward beyond UVM.

Judy.: How important do think it is that colleges offer these kinds of things for students? Real life experience?

Carrie.: I think in this day and age, getting real life experience while you're in college is especially important when you think about the job prospects. We find that many students get connected to something that they become so passionate about they end up getting a job in that field or they end up getting connected to that community in Vermont and end up staying and Vermont. The aspects of professional preparation and real life experience are especially important. The service learning and other things like that that are that engaging also helps students to stay connected to their campus so there's a big impact on retention. Students who are engaged in these activities are often more successful in college too.
Judy.: Interesting. Our service learning class is as challenging and rigorous as traditional academic class and how does it work as far as grading is concerned?

Carrie.: It is a whole different way of learning and a different way of teaching so we get that question a lot. In fact I believe it can be more rigorous and students are being asked to take their learning in a book or classroom and apply it in real life context so it gets messy gets complicated students really have to be more accountable for the work they're doing. It's not just about the paper they are turning in for their own grade it's really about a community member that they're trying to work with. That accountability and complexity makes that a rigorous experience that is different from staying in the classroom.

Judy.: Is that what you found Kelly?

Kelly.: I think so. I've seen students who might have had projects that were not as successful as other projects in the classroom but those students often end up learning the most about themselves and the community partner through those experiences reflecting on what went wrong and what they could have done better themselves.

Judy.: Carrie what sort of affect can the service learning class have on local nonprofits and other community partners that are part of this?

Carrie.: One of the things we hear most frequently is I never would have had time to do the project without these students. Quite often students are filling in the gaps for things that nonprofits just that the amount of things they have on their plate and the things they're trying to accomplish they have projects they wish they could do but maybe do not have time for, so that's a perfect example of where service learning students often come in. The other area is when service learning students have a particular area or set of skills or knowledge particularly a researched base where they know how to do an evaluation or research or a scientific knowledge base they can contribute that's more contributing to the day to day work of the organization.

Judy.: Sounds like it's a pretty huge community resource really.

Carrie.: Yes we hope so. On a given year we have up to 1500 students engaged in service learning courses over the course of the year so that's 1500 students out in the community and many of them doing 20 or more hours over the course of the semester with nonprofit organizations. We do hope it’s making a pretty big impact.

Judy.: Do nonprofits approach you or does it work the other way around?

Carrie.: It works in all sorts of ways. We do have a venue where nonprofits can approach us and say I have a project would like to talk to about and we can work through that with them. Sometimes it's the right match for a service learning course sometimes we might refer them to a volunteer program or an internship program. Oftentimes faculty members have been working in communities so much that they have a lot of connections in their home community or with people there doing research with so we support that as they develop the service learning course but maybe the partnership comes from the faculty side of it.

Judy.: Does it change all the time, are there new opportunities all the time or does it strictly stay with a set course of nonprofits?
Carrie.: Both and. So there are some courses that always do service learning but every semester they're working with a different partner. So for example we have a public communications class that does marketing projects with nonprofit community organizations. Each semester that might be working with five different organizations and there are other courses like the one Kelly and I are teaching called Rebuilding Vermont that's really more of a responsive model where something has happened in the community and we feel like service learning is an avenue to address that need. In that case it was Irene and then of course there are partnerships that have been going on for 10 years and it's the same partner and the same faculty semester after semester working together.

Judy.: So what's next for service learning?

Carrie.: I think from my perspective our goal is to make service learning really infused within the culture of the university so that any student going through any academic program might be exposed to service learning early on at a very entry level and all the way up through their senior year. It certainly does not have to happen in every course and that would probably be too much for the community and for us but we really want most students who go through the university to have the opportunity and to get to where they are in their senior year and able to identify projects and take responsibility for them and really be in charge of service learning.

Judy.: For more information on partnerships and service learning at UVM, you can check their web site and the address is uvm.edu/partnerships. This is an important website for community partners who may need assistance on a program or project. I want to thank you both for joining us today. That's our program for today I'm Judy Simpson. We'll see you again next time on Across the Fence.

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