

Center for Service and Learning

The Oberlin College Center for Service and Learning facilitates partnerships among local community organizations, students, faculty members, and the College as a whole. Each year more than half of Oberlin's students serve in the community by participating in advocacy, grassroots organizing, direct service, community-based research and/or academically-based community service activities. The Center for Service and Learning (CSL) encourages all students to become involved in these efforts in accordance with Oberlin's institutional commitment to community involvement in combination with academic study.

To support Oberlin's mission of enabling students to apply their knowledge and preparing graduates "who are humane, thoughtful, and influential actors in the world," the CSL:

- Develops programs that combine community involvement with the intellectual curiosity and artistic development of college students.
- Links students with community organizations that have both a strong need for volunteers or student workers and a desire to help develop student leaders.
- Assists faculty and students interested in community-based learning.
- Sponsors programs and events designed to enhance communication and interaction between the community and the College.

The CSL is a resource to students, faculty, staff, and the wider community as they work together to address key issues. Located near downtown Oberlin in Lewis House, 68 South Professor Street, the CSL is easily accessible to students, community members, and visitors. For more information about the CSL, please stop by and meet the staff or visit the CSL website at <http://www.oberlin.edu/csl>

Background on the Greater Oberlin Area

Oberlin College is located in the center of a county that resembles the United States in microcosm. Cultural diversity is most visible in the cities of Lorain and Elyria. Lorain contains one of the largest Hispanic communities in Ohio and both cities have strong African American communities. South of Oberlin, smaller towns maintain a primary economic

focus on agriculture. Among the county's greatest assets are the first-rate Lorain County Metro Parks system, a vibrant arts community, and an active nonprofit sector, which includes organizations working on issues ranging from education reform to microenterprise development for low-income women to grassroots organizing. In addition to its considerable assets, the county faces many challenges. Urban communities are revitalizing and redeveloping their neighborhoods while they undergo a transformation from an industrial economic base to a more diverse economy. Smaller communities face the environmental and land-use pressures of urban sprawl and changing farming practices as they struggle to maintain an agricultural way of life. The county also faces serious challenges in the areas of poverty and education. Lorain County mirrors national figures on income distribution and educational achievement. Over 10% of the population lives below the poverty line, with significantly higher rates for female-headed households with children and racial minority groups. County-wide over 17% of the adult population has not completed high school.

Through growing partnerships and alliances with community groups, the CSL fulfills the College's motto of "Learning and Labor" by addressing these issues and challenges.

Community Involvement Options

The CSL maintains contact with over 200 community organizations, schools, and government agencies that seek Oberlin students for volunteer opportunities, community service work-study positions, and internships. Working on a variety of societal issues, these organizations address:

- Youth Education and Mentoring
- Hunger, Affordable Housing, and Homelessness
- Arts and Culture
- Racial Justice
- Empowering Women
- People with Disabilities
- Concerns of People of Color
- Ecological Literacy / Environmental Issues
- Grassroots Leadership
- Public Health
- Adult Education
- English as a Second Language

Each semester, the CSL hosts a community service fair where local organizations meet and recruit students. Students also have access to an on-line database of hundreds of long-term and short-term community service opportunities, and can meet personally with CSL student and professional staff to explore a range of possible service placements or develop and implement their own service projects. Also, Oberlin students have a knack for identifying an unmet need in the community and developing an initiative to address it. CSL staff support and strengthen such student-initiated programs by offering training, advising, and networking opportunities to student leaders on an as-needed basis.

Programs and Projects of the Center for Service and Learning

In keeping with Oberlin's belief that active service to society is a critical part of a quality education, the CSL emphasizes programs that allow students to combine service activities with their academic, personal, and career interests. The programs described below are designed to help students reflect critically upon and contextualize their experiences in the community.

America Reads

A significant number of Oberlin graduates go on to careers in teaching. In light of student interest in improving the educational system and in response to the National America Reads Challenge, Oberlin College has pledged to use a significant portion of its federal work-study award and other resources to develop work-study positions that address literacy issues in local classrooms and community centers. Through America Reads, Oberlin students serve as classroom literacy tutors in elementary or preschool classrooms as well as after school programs in the Oberlin area. The college students gain valuable teaching experience while helping local public school students. The America Reads tutors also participate in a variety of community outreach events.

Annually, Oberlin's America Reads tutors celebrate the legacy of Dr. Seuss by organizing an event at the Oberlin Public Library. The College student tutors and CSL staff read and enact stories by Dr. Seuss and host a Book Giveaway.

This event serves as a catalyst for getting children excited about learning to read or improving their reading skills. Each child chooses a book to take home and read. Tutors also make family literacy information available to parents and caregivers. Through this effort and other book give-aways, America Reads tutors give over 500 books to local children each year.

Community Service Work-Study Program

The CSL has teamed up with local community partners to enhance civic investment in Lorain County. Oberlin College students who are Federal Work Study eligible can work at over 20 local sites. Each year more than 150 students in both the College and the Conservatory participate in the Community Service Work-Study Program (CSWSP). Some students link their community service work-study with academic or career-related interests, and orientation, reflection, and leadership training opportunities are integrated into the program.

The Bonner Scholars Program

Through the support of the Corella and Bertram Bonner Foundation, Oberlin College offers community service scholarships to a select group of incoming students who are proven community activists and demonstrate high financial need. Throughout their time at Oberlin, Bonner Scholars maintain a 10-hour per week commitment to community service while receiving a stipend. The Bonner Scholars serve with community members in a wide variety of areas, such as education, youth and families, health and human services, social justice, and environmental sustainability. For example, one first-year Bonner Scholar serves her 10-hour commitment as a student intern at the Oberlin Heritage Center (OHC). Another student serves at The Bridge, Oberlin's community technology center. Bonners also receive a stipend for performing 280 hours of community service activities during the summer, anywhere in the world. For more information visit the Bonner Program website at http://www.oberlin.edu/csl/bonner_overview.html

Winter Term Internships

Each January during Oberlin's Winter Term, students have the opportunity take part in community outreach, independent

research, or small-group projects with faculty guidance. Working in collaboration with Career Services, CSL staff arrange internships with local community organizations. These internships range from group projects to individual placements in schools, social service organizations, and government agencies. Past projects have included assisting grassroots organizations with grantwriting, group service trips, web design for non-profit organizations, assembling archives, and other forms of community-based research. Students are asked to develop a set of learning objectives for the internship, and then report on their findings. Local Winter Term internships through the CSL allow students a unique opportunity to be deeply involved in community issues on a day-to-day basis while developing valuable skills and experience.

Community Service Resource Center (CSRC)

The Community Service Resource Center (CSRC) serves as a bridge between students and community partners who need assistance. By encouraging reflection and careful use of time, CSRC student workers serve as models of engaged service and community involvement at Oberlin College. The CSRC hosts community service fairs each semester, bringing in community partners to interact with the student body of Oberlin; it coordinates Winter Term service projects that promote community service locally and nationally; it collects data about students involvement in community service; and it periodically facilitates an Experimental College (ExCo) course on principles of community organizing at Oberlin College. Additionally, the CSRC maintains a virtual and physical library of community service resources for the benefit of the college and the greater community. For more information, and to access the Virtual Volunteer Fair, which allows students to link with community organizations all year, visit the CSRC on the web at <http://www.oberlin.edu/csl/csrf.html>

Leadership Programs

Students who have shown leadership and commitment to the nonprofit sector and public service areas are invited to apply to a variety of local, regional and/or national programs. One such program, run through the CSL, is the Activist Leadership and Learning Institute for Engaged Service (A.L.L.I.E.S.) This

three week summer institute, which consists of training workshops led by faculty and staff of Oberlin College and community partners, addresses topics and skill areas critical to effective non-profit leadership and of great interest to students. Participants develop a broader perception of the community in which they are serving, including not only the ecological health of the bioregion, but also economic, social justice, and educational concerns.

The CSL also collaborates with the Office of Career Services and the Multicultural Resource Center to provide skill-building opportunities for student leaders.

Academic Links: Community-Based Learning (CBL)

Several academic departments at Oberlin offer students opportunities for community-based learning (CBL). The two forms of CBL practiced at Oberlin include academically-based community service and community-based research (CBR).

Academically-based community service (ABCS) is an innovative teaching method that combines outreach opportunities with academic goals in ways that enrich students' understanding of how theory is applied outside of the classroom. Regardless of the topic or specific project, ABCS classes have several elements in common: academic course goals, an outreach feature, a means by which students can reflect upon their outreach and integrate community experience into their classroom work, and mechanisms for faculty to assess student learning. One professor, Carol Lasser, has created a history course entitled *History 268: Oberlin History as American History*. In the class, college students work with Oberlin public school students to research the history of Oberlin and how it fits into a broader historical context. Recently, one college student worked with a high school history class to create a report and website about Oberlin's involvement with the underground railroad.

Community-based research engages students in applied research to meet current needs of community-based organizations. The work of Eve Sandberg in Politics provides a fine example – students in *POLT 411: Practicum in Policy*

Research team up to help various non-profit and/or governmental agencies to collect data, prepare policy briefs, and propose solutions to pressing issues in Lorain County and beyond.

A sample of community-based learning courses at Oberlin College includes:

- *African-American Studies 281: Practicum in Public School Tutoring*
- *First-Year Seminar 187: Death and the Art of Dying*
- *Comparative American Studies 301: Situated Research*
- *Environmental Studies 480: Introduction to the Black River Watershed*
- *Environmental Studies 490: Nature, Culture, Pedagogy*
- *First-Year Seminar 146: HIV/AIDS in America*
- *Music Education 100: The Art of Teaching Music*
- *Music Education 206: Choral Methods*
- *Politics 411: Practicum in Policy Evaluation*
- *Rhetoric & Composition 481 / English 399: Teaching and Tutoring Writing Across the Disciplines*
- *Gender and Women's Studies 301: Practicum in Gender and Women's Studies*
- *Art Studio 041: Art and the Environment*
- *Psychology 501: Practicum in Autism*
- *Sociology 277: Race and Ethnic Relations*

For students interested in pursuing an independent project that integrates community service and academic study, CSL staff can identify faculty members willing to sponsor a private reading on the topic and often help to facilitate the student's project in the community. For example, one student worked with a psychology professor to examine a new approach for improving local teenagers' success in school. As a result of the project, several recommendations for strengthening programming were made to agencies that serve youth in the Oberlin community.

In essence, students in community-based learning courses return to the classroom with first hand experiences that enliven their class contributions and scholarship. The end results include engaged problem solvers, a more dynamic classroom, and a community enriched by meaningful contribution.

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