

Compulsory Volunteers

CSU students enjoy helping community after taking required service classes

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CHARMEAKA CANADA
CSU student

When college senior Charmeka Canada learned she would have to give 60 hours of community service to graduate from the California State University at Monterey Bay, she tried everything she could to get out of it.

Nothing worked, so she finally signed up for the mandated "service-learning class" that combines classroom learning with helping people in the community.

Canada, who is 23 and has an 18-month-old daughter, hated the class the first time around and dropped out. The second time, she was totally sold on the concept.

She is one of 2,200 students who are unique in the state's college system: They have to complete at least two service-learning classes before they can graduate.

When they do their community service, students help immigrants deal with American bureaucracies; cre-



Canada (left) tutored Asia Jaramillo (center) and Justin Chavez as part of her requirement in community service.

ate gardens where they take care of abused children, helping them learn gentleness and compassion by teaching them to care for plants and animals; tutor; and create Web sites for nonprofit organizations. They have also restored and created exhibits and educational cur-

► COURSES: Page A26 Col. 5

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CSU Students Learn to Like Volunteer Work

► COURSES
From Page A19

riculum at the Mission San Juan Bautista.

Gov. Gray Davis wants community service to be mandatory at all state college and university campuses starting in September.

CSU and University of California faculty and administrators who have been grappling with the issue will present their proposals to their governing boards next week.

If they want some pointers on how to do it, they need only look at CSU at Monterey Bay.

Set on the old Fort Ord Army base, it is the only public college or university in the state and among only a few in the nation to require service for graduation. More than 1,000 of its students fan out every semester to 125 different schools, social service agencies and nonprofit groups around the county while taking classes at the university that complement their experiences in the field.

Change of Heart

At first, students complain that the 30-hour semester requirement eats into their study time, makes it difficult for them to hold down a job and is offensive because service should be something they want to do, not something they are forced to do. But nearly 70 percent are converts to the cause by the time they are finished, and some extend their experiences into permanent jobs.

After her stint with senior citizens and children, Canada even signed up to be a student adviser for the service program, mentoring and organizing service activities for other students, completing the mandatory four-week summer training session while she was nine months pregnant.

"By spending more time with these kids and watching how happy the senior citizens were when we came once a week, I wanted to continue," she said.

Her experiences gave her more than just the warm feeling of helping others. It gave her a new direction in life.

Before doing the service, she switched majors three times, unsure of what she wanted to do.

"It helped me discover that I really wanted to work with kids, to be a teacher. The cool thing is that you are serving, but at the same time, you are learning," she said.

Class Requirements

As part of the classes, students usually keep weekly journals, are assigned readings that complement their service experiences and prepare papers that reflect what they have learned.

Students in the course "Applied Watershed Systems Restoration" got some help recently from a guest speaker, landscape architect Joni Jannecki, who hauled a dozen or so different potted plants into the classroom. Then she helped the students work through examples of landscape design, such as grouping different plant types and how to best use a space by considering conditions like shading and drainage. The students will take what they learned from this session when they go out into the community to restore a park with native plants or to create a school garden with the help of children.

Administrators at the partnership sites say the students' contribution is invaluable.

Roxanne Regules, principal of Cesar Chavez Elementary School in Salinas, where students tutor children in reading and lead a class on the media, said the school's test scores have risen remarkably since the partnership started.

"It is extremely important because the students see the service-learning students as role models,

and the one-on-one support they give to the students helps so much," she said. "We would have a hole without them."

Since the beginning of the program in 1995, CSU at Monterey Bay students have contributed 105,000 hours to the community — the equivalent of about \$735,000 in labor.

Community organizations say they are eager to have students to help them, but they worry about the overwhelming number of students who would come knocking at their doors if community service were mandated across the state.

While the service-learning system works well at the CSU campus, the school is one of the smallest four-year public universities in the state. There is much skepticism about whether a mandatory service requirement could work at the larger UC or CSU campuses, where the sheer number of students could make the task overwhelming.

Professor Robert Spear, chairman of the Berkeley division of the UC

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Academic Senate, who is developing UC's response to the governor's proposal, said there is a lot of support for the governor's general goal of instilling an ethic for community service in all students. But, he said, setting up and running the volunteer system would be a huge and costly undertaking.

There are also serious concerns about students who are already working long hours, struggling financially just to stay in school, and there are worries that adding graduation requirements could lengthen the time it takes to finish.

Spear said the answer may be to expand the opportunity for service and to encourage more students to participate.

CSU will probably do something similar, said Ericka Randall, coordinator of community-service learning in the CSU chancellor's office. The responses prepared by individual campuses emphasize that they are against a mandatory service requirement but hope the governor's attention will provide them with the support needed to bolster the many existing programs.

One solution could be to make service-learning classes so pervasive that students could hardly avoid them, she said.

"If every department offers service-learning courses, then students will end up taking a course at some point," Randall said. "But it will be in a flexible way, so that they can choose when they want to take the class and how they want to have that experience."

Some students at the Monterey campus scoff at that idea.

Marie Ricco, 19, said the graduation requirement is an extra burden for students like her who already volunteer a lot of time for various activities.

"If I see service learning next to one of my upper-division courses, I say, 'Uh, uh.' It means 30 more hours of work," she said.