'Service Learning' Becomes the New Standard at Tulane U.

In architecture, neuroscience, and other disciplines, professors make rebuilding New Orleans a central part of the curriculum.

Jackson Hill for The Chronicle

As part of a service-learning course, students from Tulane U. document a chant by the North Side Skull and Bones Gang during Mardi Gras.

By Katherine Mangan FEBRUARY 21, 2010 PREMIUM

NEW ORLEANS

Tulane University students have been reveling during Mardi Gras and enjoying jazz in the French Quarter for more than a century.

But last week, as another Mardi Gras celebration kicked off, Tulane students were also studying the lives of powerful women in the community: the Mardi Gras Indian queens. This year students also participated in archaeological digs, used their
rhetorical skills to coach debate teams at local middle schools, and generally played a more active, and academic, role in the social fabric of the city.

It's a requirement. After Hurricane Katrina devastated this city and forced the university to close for the fall 2005 semester, community service has become the defining focus of a curriculum that was hastily revamped but is now firmly in place.

"In the aftermath of Katrina, Tulane was forced to make a number of radical and drastic decisions. We were in survival mode," says Ana M. López, associate professor of communication and associate provost for faculty affairs. "We felt early on that Tulane had a responsibility not only to reopen, but also to help rebuild the city."

But installing "service learning" across all departments was a difficult and hotly debated process. Some faculty members, for instance, worried about it interfering with their research.

In the months following the storm, when faculty members were dispersed and administrators were working out of temporary headquarters at a Houston hotel, a presidential advisory committee drafted the beginnings of what became known as the university's renewal plan. The goal was to reinvent Tulane, in part by emphasizing service learning, in which theories learned in the classroom are applied in everyday life. This would be required and integrated into all four undergraduate years.

At the same time, cuts were being proposed that would result in the elimination of more than 200 faculty jobs, mostly in the medical school, and the suspension of 14 doctoral programs and five undergraduate majors.

Some faculty members and deans objected that they were being left out of the decision-making process. But since there was no way to reach thousands of dispersed employees, let alone convene the usual faculty committees, a presidential advisory group huddled together in Houston over the next few weeks to begin work on a curriculum overhaul.

Tulane's president, Scott S. Cowen, made the case that the city could not survive without its largest employer, Tulane, and that finding a way to help New Orleans recover was key to Tulane's survival.

But while many faculty members agreed that the futures of Tulane and New Orleans were inextricably linked, some balked at the proposed curriculum overhaul.

"Initially, some faculty were reluctant to embrace service learning as a requirement for undergraduates," Ms. López says. Some felt that developing new courses and
monitoring students' community involvement would take too much time and interfere with research commitments.

Tulane's incoming students wanted it, however. The service focus struck a chord with high-school students around the country, who applied to the university in record numbers. Many of the students had volunteered in New Orleans after Katrina struck and wanted to return.

Reaching Out

So in the spring of 2006, a new faculty curriculum committee was appointed to move forward with the restructuring plan. That committee, made up of eight faculty members from across the disciplines, still exists, but members are now elected.

Tulane's community-service requirement comes in two parts. All students must, in their first two years, take a service-learning course. Some of those courses grew out of interdisciplinary "experience seminars" that have been offered since 2002. In their final two undergraduate years, students must complete another service-learning project, which might include an internship, upper-level course, or independent project.

The number of service-learning courses at Tulane has jumped from about 30 per semester before Katrina to 132 this year. About half are new, and half are classes that were revamped to include a service component.

In "Loot, Plunder, and Pillage," an associate professor of classical studies, Susann S. Lusnia, had students participate in digs in the French Quarter, where they discovered 18th-century pottery, buttons, and other personal items. The digs uncovered information about the early history of New Orleans, which she related to the lessons learned in digs in ancient cities like Pompeii.

Like many faculty members, she had her doubts about the new requirement.

"Knowing the shape New Orleans would be in when we returned, the idea of focusing on service learning made sense," she says. "Coming from the classics department, though, it wasn't immediately clear where we fit in." Ms. Lusnia saw an opportunity in the archaeological studies that were being conducted in damaged parts of the city before they could be razed.

"There was a lot of talk about preservation of cultural traditions, and I wanted to tap into that," she says.
In an English course, "Aristotle in New Orleans," Tulane students coach debate teams at four New Orleans middle schools, using the rhetorical and dialectical methods of Aristotle and other ancient theorists.

Students taking a communication course, "Feminist Documentation and New Media," work with women in local cultural groups known as Indian tribes to create documentary films. On Mardi Gras Day, the last day of the carnival season, students collect footage of the festival's Indian queens marching in elaborate feathered costumes through New Orleans's Ninth Ward. The course, taught by Betsy A. Weiss, an adjunct assistant professor of communication, teaches students the technical skills of documentary filmmaking while helping preserve the centuries-old tradition of the Indian queens.

"The goal of this service activity is to provide examples for students of strong women in positions of power within their community and to document the traditions of these women from a feminist perspective, rather than from an authoritarian viewpoint," Ms. Weiss says.

In an advanced neurosciences course, students volunteer in the cancer ward of a local hospital, observing and mingling with patients who exhibit symptoms the students have been learning about in class.

The Tulane School of Architecture has been working with neighborhoods throughout the city on design and rebuilding. The school also has established urban farms, which help restore neighborhoods as well as provide healthy foods.

The president of a national group that promotes service learning calls Tulane "a strong leader" in the field. "Other universities have taken similar steps, but not necessarily as quickly as Tulane," says Maureen F. Curley, president of Campus Compact, which works with about 1,100 campuses. For Tulane, engaging students in the life of a devastated community was a matter of survival.

Other universities with less urgent needs have responded to crises in their communities with similar outreach efforts, Ms. Curley says. The University of Pennsylvania has been working to improve local schools, while California State University at San Bernardino has taught classes about fires and mudslides.

Fast Course Approvals

For Tulane, one of the biggest challenges has been fast-tracking the course-approval process.
"Getting new courses approved usually takes a year, so we had to speed up the process," says Ms. López. Curriculum committees have met frequently by e-mail, posting materials on a common Web site. "Decision making is not limited to those rare times when faculty can meet around a table."

Before Katrina, most new course approvals happened at the end of the semester, or the end of the year, she says. Now it's a continuing process throughout the year.

In order to introduce a new course, faculty members must get approval from two committees. The Center for Public Service approves the service-learning component and forwards the proposal to the universitywide curriculum committee. That committee makes sure the courses are academically sound and that the civic activity is directly connected to what students are learning in the classroom.

For instance, a physics course that sends students out into public schools to tutor students in basic science would not pass muster, but one that helped conduct more advanced physics labs probably would, says Vincent Ilustre, executive director of the Center for Public Service, which opened at Tulane after Katrina.

The center has offered seminars every semester since Katrina struck to help faculty members structure service-oriented courses in fields as diverse as biology and religion. Academic departments got planning grants to help them decide how best to incorporate civic engagement into their classes.

One of the goals of the office is to establish partnerships with community groups that will outlast the involvement of a particular faculty member or service-learning class.

"Often a faculty member will partner with someone, and the next semester he's not teaching the course, and the next, he's on sabbatical," Mr. Ilustre says. The center has developed a network of nearly 400 community partners and typically works with about 120 per semester. That way, it maintains a database of groups that need help and can maintain continuity from semester to semester.

Tulane's president, Mr. Cowen, says that legacy of service will serve Tulane well into the future.

"It's not enough to survive, it's not enough to recover," he says. "You have to rebuild. You have to thrive."