WHICH WORKS BEST
to ensure that people who have been homeless for years can one day live well and thrive off the streets — living in apartment communities with others who once were homeless or living among the broader community?

What can small, nonprofit, sustainable farming organizations do to make sure they use the most environmentally responsible technology for their operations?

How can students learn how their future careers might fit into the context of a great big, interconnected world full of diverse people, viewpoints and experiences — and how they might best make a difference?

The answer? Community-based learning and research (CBLR), an organized and strategic approach to giving students the opportunity to learn by doing while performing valuable services for deserving community organizations.

“When students are engaged in learning that goes back and forth between the theory they learn in class and the practice they gain in the community, it deepens their learning. They retain knowledge and can apply it better in their future professions because it’s relational and experiential learning,” explains Kara Adams, interim director of the Office of Community-Based Learning and Research.

By Teresa Moore
JOINING WITH THE COMMUNITY, STUDENTS SUPPORT OTHERS WHILE GAINING REAL-WORLD SKILLS
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KARA ADAMS, INTERIM DIRECTOR OF THE OFFICE OF COMMUNITY-BASED LEARNING AND RESEARCH

LAUREN FAY graduated from UW Bothell in 2007 and soon found her first career job at the nonprofit Downtown Emergency Services Center (DESC) in Seattle. “I knew immediately it was where I belonged,” she says.

Working with chronically homeless people — most of them with mental illness and/or addiction issues — came easily to her. She liked helping them solve problems and guiding them to permanent homes.

Her own rich experience at UW Bothell, with the blend of “all my passions” she found in an Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences degree, led her to reconnect with the University and invite students to get involved in an important research project.

DESC is partnering with DePaul University in a three-year project to determine the best housing options for different DESC clients. They want to understand what leads to better quality of life and longer retention of housing — living with other formerly homeless people in DESC-owned buildings where they receive centralized support, or living in apartments scattered throughout the city with support services brought to them.

UW Bothell students will be among the research assistants who meet with prospective participants while they're still homeless to determine if they meet the criteria to participate in a human-subject study. After DESC clients move into housing, the student researchers will then follow up with detailed questions and survey instruments at three- and six-month intervals.

“When you are working with people who are experiencing homelessness, serious mental health issues, poverty, human rights issues and discrimination, it’s really important that the people you bring in as student researchers understand them,” says Lauren. “I just knew, based on my own experiences, that the coursework and the guidance of the professors at UW Bothell produce students who are able to understand all those complexities.”

AS AN ENGINEER with a doctorate in political economy and international studies, Professor Steve Collins brought a unique perspective to designing a course called The Citizen Engineer.

“I wanted the class to open students’ minds to the world beyond engineering,” he says. “There’s more to healthy existence than having the latest technological gadget. Those gadgets help to shape our lives, our politics. As engineers, we have the capacity to reshape the technological trajectory of society.”

He chose sustainable agriculture as the focus of the course — at first glance, not something particularly in sync with engineering. But the CBLR office connected students with five different local farming nonprofits and relied on the students’ creativity to take it from there.

Joshua Hurley, a senior studying mechanical engineering, is part of a group working with Farmer Frog, a nonprofit that promotes environmentally responsible technologies for sustainable small-scale farming. Their task — which he and several other students adopted as their capstone project — is to develop a renewable energy source for an aquaponics system, which combines aquaculture and hydroponics to grow both plants and fish in nutrient-rich water. They decided to explore wind and solar power.

“The pumps for an aquaponics system need to run constantly. They take a lot of energy,” explains Joshua. “Our biggest challenge was determining the feasibility of collecting wind and solar power where we don’t get a lot of consistent wind or sunshine to generate energy.”

Students’ engineering skills weren’t all that came into play. They had to put together a budget, manage all aspects of the project, communicate clearly and be accountable to their client at every stage — everything they’ll encounter as professional engineers.

Joshua says Collins’ course on ethics in engineering leant a unique perspective to the project.

“We have to start effecting change now and that means looking at sustainability,” he says. “This project mixes both sustainable food production and sustainable energy. The group designed a scalable solar solution that allows Farmer Frog to sell excess energy back to the utilities during summer months.

For Joshua, Lauren and thousands of UW Bothell students and alumni just like them, learning by doing has the extra added benefit of making a real difference.