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## LEARNING POWERED BY HELPING

## CNU WORKS TO INCREASE CLASSES THAT FOCUS ON COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT.

by [Kelli Caplan](#) | January 31, 2025*Read time: about 2 min*

At Christopher Newport, more courses are breaking down the wall between campus and community, transforming learning into a hands-on, real-world experience.

The list of these courses grows as more professors explore the field of [Community Engaged Learning \(CEL\)](#), which merges course material with assignments that support local organizations. The result is students contributing to a tangible positive impact on the local community while amassing experience problem solving in real time.

Professor Ann Mazzocca Bellecci, associate professor of Dance in the [Department of Music, Theatre and Dance](#), teaches an honors seminar on dance studies that is also a CEL class. Students in her class visited the [Sarfan Food Forest](#) in downtown Newport News to work with elementary school students to bring to life their studies on the relationship between environmental justice, dance and wellness. It's an ideal way, Bellecci believes, for students to apply what they are learning: combining the importance of green space and the benefits of dance.



“CEL is the future of higher education, helping students develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, fostering civic responsibility and cultural humanity, and building their interpersonal and professional competencies,” said Dr. Brooke Covington, academic director for the [Center for Community Engagement](#).

There is a growing demand for CEL classes, as students and faculty focus on the added dimension they bring to learning. Students not only assist community organizations, they also develop skills and gain perspective they can take into the workforce.

“Students are craving these types of learning experiences,” Covington added. “CEL courses not only enrich students’ academic journeys, but also prepare them to be proactive, thoughtful and socially responsible members of their communities and professional fields. Unlike internships, CEL provides students with a unique opportunity to apply academic concepts to real-world challenges, while being guided by the mentorship and support of their instructor. This is key to their development.”

Christopher Newport puts an emphasis on CEL courses and encourages faculty to add community angles to their teaching. The University’s Center for Community Engagement even offers [Tidewater Faculty Fellowships](#), to train faculty in this pedagogical approach and fund the cost of developing the course framework.

Bellecci’s CEL dance class was created in partnership with the [Newport News Green Foundation](#), which works to increase the number of green spaces in the city and to make the best use of them. The class has broadened her students’ views of the community and the impact they can have on it.

“A university setting can be enriching, but it can also be kind of insular,” Bellecci said. “This is a nice way for students to learn more about the people and about Newport News.”

Alyssa Dozier, ‘26 [History](#) and [Political Science](#), agreed.

“This class lets us apply what we learn to a real world setting. It has given me a different perspective,” said Dozier, who is in Bellecci’s class. “It makes me want to learn more.”

In Dr. Sarah King’s Urban Economics class, the work is different but the goal is the same: add dimension to students’ world views and infuse their learning with hands-on experiences off campus. Students in King’s class work alongside five local nonprofits to better understand how economics plays a part in the workings of a community.

At the end of the semester, students presented their findings and suggestions to the organizations.

One of the groups worked with [HELP Inc.](#), a community organization focused on affordable housing and providing shelter and assistance to those in need. The students studied zoning laws and investigated ways to increase housing.

“It’s been very helpful to have real world experience,” said Abby Clickener, ‘26 [Economics](#). “I have liked consulting with local businesses and people. I really have enjoyed getting to know our area, and to know the community I’m now a part of.”