Professor Implements Community-Engaged Learning in Classroom
Research Project Stirs Emotions in Both Students and Clients
by Annetta Crecelius

When Elizabeth Sperber set out to teach her Political Inquiry class last quarter, she never thought she would be sitting in a room full of students and former felons with tears in their eyes.

“I decided to take a different approach to this class by using community-engaged teaching to work with a local nonprofit on an issue-based research project. I wanted to help my students become informed consumers of social science research and to help them build their own research skills, while contributing to the greater good,” said the assistant professor of political science.

Sperber had received training through DU’s Center for Community Engagement & Service Learning (CCESL), where she learned how to implement community-engaged learning and scholarship in the classroom. Through CCESL, she connected with Hassan Latif, executive director of the Second Chance Center (SCC). Like most of the staff at SCC, Latif was formerly incarcerated, and had developed a “ground-up” model of service delivery enabling formerly incarcerated men and women to reintegrate into their communities. Sperber set the wheels in motion to collaborate with SCC on a mixed-methods research project to help them evaluate the significance of their work in a more holistic way.

With the help of a grant from CCESL, Sperber invested in two DU graduate students to help collect data from SCC clients and staff using focus groups and brief surveys. One of the research assistants, Kerry-Ann Lewis Pearcy, worked with Sperber to mentor undergraduate students in their qualitative analysis. In both small groups and as a class, students worked together to identify and prioritize themes across focus groups. In the end, Sperber lead the class in a consensus-based process to design their final report for the organization and presentation to SCC staff.

By highlighting what was most meaningful to focus group participants, the findings will help inform how SCC thinks about future services and staff training needs, how they articulate the importance of their work to funders, and how they give voice to their clients and advocate for better public policies. It was as they presented to Second Chance Center staff and clients that Sperber’s students were finally able to see the emotional, real-world impact of their work.

“I’m sitting there trying not to tear up because I’m supposed to be some hard ex-convict,” laughed SCC’s Latif. “But to hear [the students] give voice to our folks, and to see them—even though [they hadn’t] met them personally—but to see them through their own words and their own experiences, that’s very, very important.”

“Community-engaged teaching has to be a process of consultation that is collaborative, transparent, and mutually beneficial,” Sperber said about the program. In this case, her class built a solid methodological foundation for her students, while enabling them to engage their community and use their powerful new skills to assist men and women seeking a second chance.