

## Professors hope research helps communities

By Kristin Day  
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Professors Sharon Paynter and Maureen Berner wanted to do something useful with their research.

One day while having lunch together, Paynter, now an assistant professor at ECU's Department of Political Science, and Berner, from the University of North Carolina's School of Government, shared a common desire to use their skills and knowledge in a way that would benefit their communities.

From that conversation, the pair began The North Carolina Hunger Project, in which the women collect data about food banks and pantries, and the people associated with them.

"We got involved in the project because we were interested in working together on an issue in which we both had background," said Paynter, a former executive director of the nonprofit Area Christians Working Together in Service (A.C.T.S.). Located in Henderson, A.C.T.S. runs a food pantry, a soup kitchen and two shelters. Berner has a work history involving food pantries in Iowa, her native state.

"We want our research to be useful," Paynter continued. "... This project has been an evolution for three or four years."

Paynter is a North Carolina native who was initially employed as a social worker after receiving a bachelor's degree in biology from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

"I did child abuse and neglect investigations, which are incredibly difficult," Paynter said. "I wanted to still help people but in a less traumatic environment. So when the job at the food pantry (A.C.T.S.) opened, I applied for that."

She was executive director of the nonprofit for four years until 2001, when she returned to UNC to receive her first master's degree in public administration. She afterward got her second master's in Denver, in legal administration, and then earned her doctorate in public administration in 2008 from N.C. State University, where she also taught classes. She spent a year as a Public Policy Fellow at Brown University before returning to her home state to teach at East Carolina University.

The N.C. Hunger Project was well under way by then. She and Berner, who is also Paynter's former professor, and photojournalist Donn Young set out in 2008 to research and record everything about nonprofit food banks and pantries in the eastern part of the state, including information on the volunteers, the clients and the funding.

The story of this pilot study was told in UNC's Winter 2010 issue of "Endeavors" magazine and the two professors published their findings in "Policy Studies Journal." In May, the North Carolina Office of Archives and History will showcase their work in photo displays titled, "A Portrait of Hunger, the Social Safety Net, and the Working Poor," which also will be presented to the N.C. General Assembly.

"I knew anecdotally that food pantries collect lots and lots of data about their clients," Paynter said of her experience. "... And the process of simply handing out the food and making sure people get the resources they need is sometimes overwhelming. But it surprises me that we are able to support that now with statistical research."

Through their findings, the professors and the photographer are able to tell the stories of the people who regularly visit food pantries, and how these organizations manage to operate with little funds. And what they found were similar stories from pantry to pantry.

"There are lots of stereotypes of who food pantry clients are," Paynter said, "and by in large, our

research has shown that those stereotypes are not accurate.”

Many people think that food pantry regulars are unemployed, Paynter said. But working individuals and families are actually more likely to experience what’s called “long-term food insecurity.”

“It means that people who have jobs are making decisions to buy food or pay for rent, or pay for transportation to get to work, or buy school clothes or medications,” she said.

As their research continues and expands, they’ve partnered with the Food Bank of Central and Eastern North Carolina, which has a Greenville branch and supports 34 counties. After all of the information is compiled, food banks, like the one in Greenville, and pantries, like the Ayden Christian Care Center and the Ministries of the Bread of Life in Farmville — both of which were featured in the pilot study — can use the research results to aid in writing grant proposals, newsletters, presentations to stakeholder groups or soliciting help from city councils.

“I think when I went into this, I thought the whole issue was about the client,” Paynter said. “... The other part is about the organization that serves the clients. Do they have the resources they need? Are they funded and have a professional staff or are they run by volunteers? And do they have the training they need? Or even, on the more basic level, can they refrigerate donations? If they get a lot of meat or vegetables, are they going to be able to use it?”

Since the pilot study was completed, Paynter has spoken at conferences to share these stories and hopefully begin a push for policy change. But eventually, Paynter said, she, Berner and Young hope that their work can be a starting point for community conversations — to find better ways to support local food banks.

“One, I hope we have a better understanding of what the issues relative to hunger poverty and food assistance are,” she said. “Two, that we’ve been able to give communities and nonprofits and universities a better opportunity to use information to affect policy change. And (three), to learn in my own work. I would like to use my research in the classroom to teach students about hunger and policy, and how to conduct research; to teach them how to use research conducted by other people.”

In the meantime, she and Berner are writing grant proposals to conduct a statewide study. After that, the two professors may embark on a multi-state study.

“I don’t know exactly how that will all come into play,” Paynter said. “... This sort of thing is happening quickly, so I’m not sure that we’ve fully captured all the ways we can use (the research) yet.”

To read the story in “Endeavors” online, visit <http://research.unc.edu/endeavors/win2010/index.php>.

Contact Kristin Day at [kday@reflector.com](mailto:kday@reflector.com) or (252) 329-9579.

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