“I’m a teacher and I truly believe education is the beginning of freedom.”

That philosophy sent Beth Richards, director of rhetoric and professional writing in the College of Arts and Sciences, to Afghanistan for a month this past summer to teach English to engineering students at Herat University. The students use English-language texts in science, math, and engineering courses.

Several faculty members from Herat University are currently studying at the University of Hartford for master’s degrees in engineering. Grants from the U.S. Agency for International Development and the World Bank have funded the alliance between the two universities and made the exchange of faculty possible. M. Saleh Keshawarz, associate professor of civil engineering in the College of Engineering, Technology, and Architecture (CETA), and his colleagues Hisham Alnajjar and Ivana Milanovic at CETA are the recipients of the grants.

“If there’s anything Afghanistan needs, it’s civil engineers who can rebuild infrastructure,” says Richards.

Richards started by creating a new textbook to replace the old ones, which she found inadequate. She also hopes to bring more advanced technology to Herat University when she returns in May 2009. Currently, access to the Internet is very limited, and there are no computers in the classrooms.

Those are only two of the many differences between Herat University and American universities. In Afghanistan, men and women sit on opposite sides of the classroom and do not mingle. Women, particularly those studying engineering, stick very close together. But they told Richards they felt free to go anywhere they wanted and that men did not try to stand in the way of their education.

Richards says many of the Afghan men she met “clearly believe women have a place in education, academia, and engineering.” But she also knows that a few of her male students were not happy to have a woman teaching their class. Female students, however, “were thrilled to have a female professor.”

“Certainly at the university there is progress, and opportunities [exist] for women,” Richards points out. “But there need to be more.”

Being a woman and an American, Richards says she was the subject of intense curiosity. She often caught people staring at her fair skin and gray hair. Because the life expectancy is less than 45 years in Afghanistan, gray hair is very unusual. In fact, one child even asked her if she came from outer space!

Most people asked her another question: “Why would you ever want to come to Afghanistan?” For Richards, the answer was simple.

“It seems to me I’ve lived a life of intense privilege as a person and as a female,” she says. “I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do something to pass that on. I feel that I’ve gained so much [by coming to Afghanistan]. I worked hard, but I learned so much, met so many wonderful people. It’s a whole new dimension of life I never anticipated five years ago.”

Editor’s note: While at Herat University, Richards wrote about her daily experiences in Afghanistan, both as a professor and as an American woman. To read “Letters from Herat,” visit the online journal ePluribusMedia at www.epluribusmedia.org and type “Beth Richards” into the search box.