Learning by Giving

Giving and receiving work together at Hope, with strong student interest in helping others yielding lessons that in turn transform them.

It’s a relationship that begins with the students’ commitment to serving others, a priority that has often come with them from their lives before college but finds ample opportunity for expression at Hope. It is facilitated not only by the nature of the experience, but also by deliberate effort at the college to make service learning a significant and even defining part of a Hope education, one component in helping students to develop a living faith that will guide them in making a difference in the world in which they will serve and lead after graduation.

The emphasis has earned the college both national and statewide recognition, twice in the past six months. In October, Hope was named to the national President’s Higher Education Community Service Honor Roll, one of 15 colleges or universities from Michigan included, designed to increase public awareness of the contributions that college students are making within their local communities and across the country through voluntary service. In February, Dr. Steven Hooogevest ’77 of the religion faculty received a Faculty-Staff Community Service-Learning Award from the Michigan Campus Compact for engaging or influencing students to be involved in community service or service-learning through modeling, influence or instruction.

The opportunities for volunteer and service engagement at Hope take many forms, ranging from relatively short-term activities like the popular spring break mission trip program, to massive project-oriented efforts like the Dance Marathon charitable drive that runs much of the year to ongoing involvement with community organizations like the Children’s After School Achievement (CASA) program based at Hope, to initiatives that are either tied closely to academic programs or even scheduled as part of a specific course.

The students make a difference. In fact, it’s the strong student interest in serving that helps make CASA possible. During the school year, CASA provides individual tutoring for at-risk, elementary-age children—154 of them this year. Helping students to develop a living faith that will guide them in making a difference in the world in which they will serve and lead after graduation.
"Our tutors are the reason why we can do activities on this scale," said Fonda Green, CASA's executive director. "Our tutors include community people, among them retired and even high school students, but a huge majority of them are Hope students."

"It's CASA's primary focus is on helping the children with their homework, but the tutors and kids form bonds that are lasting. "I love the relationship with Zulahida," said senior Becki Sexton of Kalamazoo, Mich., who is in her seventh semester as a CASA tutor. She initially signed on her freshman year to fulfill a class practicum requirement, but has remained ever since as one own.

Some 500 students are involved in Dance Marathon, which is organized by Hope students, and raises funds for Helen DeVos Children's Hospital of Grand Rapids through the Children's Miracle Network. Students, come on their own and many through involvement in other groups like the college's fraternities and sororities, work throughout the school year to raise money for the event, which culminates in a 24-hour dance in early March.

This year's executive director, senior Tara Vandervest of Kalamazoo, Mich., has been involved in Dance Marathon since her freshman year. She has appreciated the friendships and fun of the event but, especially, where she has found satisfaction in making a difference, as Dance Marathon's motto notes, "Building a better world." "I just love Dance Marathon," Vandervest said. "It's shown me a lot of what I am and what I can do, and it challenges me every day."

The college's spring break mission trip program is a tradition that goes back decades. This year, more than 200 students participated in more than 20 trips to urban and rural settings in both the U.S. and abroad.

Purposely organized in cooperation with agencies at the sites, the trips range from service-oriented work such as building projects to sharing the gospel with the area population.

Relationships with the people served are an integral part of the program. Since Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005, for example, students and staff have made multiple trips—not only during spring break but at other times—so work with Little Rock Missionary Baptist Church in Gulfport, Miss., in distributing supplies, repairing homes and participating in ministry.

Students who have participated in the program's annual Spring Life trip to the Dominican Republic have even returned later. "We've had many students end up spending summers there and even staying for years after graduation," said Barbara Arneson '80 Osburn, director of outreach with Campus Ministries. From Osburn's perspective the work done during the trips is only part of the story. "What's especially important is what happens in the lives of our students," she said. "They see people in these different kinds of situations, and they see that God uses anybody."

It's that lesson that intrigues Dr. Doug Wilson, the associate professor of religion who has accompanied students on a variety of the trips, both within the U.S. and abroad. "All of a sudden their world is made a lot bigger than it was, and that's valuable because the world is much larger than our individual ego," he said.

His interest in service-learning began with helping the trips' student leaders find ways to work with the other participants in processing such lessons deliberatley.

Following his freshman year, he participated in religion professor Dr. Boyd Wilson's popular course in India. While there, he spent a morning volunteering at Mother Teresa's Home for the Sick and Dying in Kolkata.

"That's all it took," he said. "It was only one morning, but it was probably one of the most powerful moments of my entire life," Nettielon said.

As a 19-year-old young American, having that experience of feeding a dying man, surrounded by people who were just as ill, that put me on that track," he said. "My interest in justice and poverty started to come to fruition then."

As one manifestation of his interest, he initiated the college's chapter of Acting on AIDS, which has chapters at Christian colleges across the country. "This is something that we should be caring about," he said. "This is something that God would be caring about."

Finding ways to connect the academic program with student interest in service is an important focus for the CrossRoads Project, which was established at Hope in 2003 to help students think theologically about career, calling and life. "We want to send them to places where we know they will have good experiences and where they can be helpful," said Dr. Daniel Cunningham, who is director of CrossRoads and a professor of religion. "But we also want to make sure that they can profit from the experience in terms of vocational discernment. We think that, when students get into contexts in which they're not accustomed, they experience a significant maturing in their processes of discernment."

Supported through a grant through the Lilly Endowment Inc.'s "Program for the Theological Formation of Vocation," CrossRoads in turn assists multiple programs as they develop such initiatives. Among others, CrossRoads has worked with Dr. Robin Klay as she has developed an internship program in Puerto Escondido, Mexico, with Dr. Joel Toppen '91 in connecting students with internships with World Vision in South Africa, and with the student leaders Without Borders (EWB) group to assist the village of Nkuv in Cameroon.

The EWB project involves two academic departments, engineering and nursing, in addressing issues of water purity, ultimately to help reduce waterborne disease among the villagers. Since starting its work in 2006, the EWB-engineering-nursing team has designed and built water filters and helped the population take steps to limit the onset and spread of diseases.

Senior Anna Marshall of Levering, Mich., a nursing major, went to Cameroon twice, and found the experience an important affirmation. "I feel so thankful to have the experiences of these two trips as motivators for the future decisions I will make concerning vocation and calling," she said.

CrossRoads, the college's premedical program and Campus Ministries are working together to create a new initiative in Uganda that will be led this summer by Dr. David DeVries '64 of Zeeland, Mich., a physician who does volunteer work overseas himself, for pre-medical students who want to make their careers a form of ministry and wish to see what form that could take.

"It is going to be an incredible opportunity to learn from the Ugandan people," said senior Michelle Gendraun of Camden, Mich., a biology major who is signed up for the trip. "This is exactly what I want to do. My dream is to be a physician and serve in an underserved area, whether international or national."

"That's just how I see myself practicing as a physician," she said. "I just feel like it's a great match between something that God's put in my heart and a passion that I've had for medicine."

Volunteer efforts also intermingle meaningfully with the academic program. The college's chapter of CEF's Children Without Borders is working with the departments of engineering and nursing in addressing issues of health and water quality in Nkuv, Cameroon.

Dance Marathon spans nearly the entire school year and involves hundreds of students in raising funds for Helen DeVos Children's Hospital. Held this year on March 9-10, the event has raised more than $597,000 since beginning in 2000. For more images from this year's Dance Marathon, please visit www.hope.edu/pr/gallery/