Learning at Hope involves more than the classroom. True, it is the college’s academic program that drives the school year and ultimately leads to a degree, but Hope delivers important lessons in the living that happen beyond the hours spent in class or studying. With the focus on educating the whole person, there’s no less to be learned in the residence hall, during chapel, on the playing field, or engaged in any number of activities organized for and by students.

As director of student activities and Greek life, Ellen Tann Awad ’90 oversees some 70 student organizations. They almost run A to Z, ranging from Acting on AIDS to the Women’s Lacrosse Club with examples in between including the Anchor student newspaper, the Black Student Union, the Union of Catholic Students, traditional events like the Pull tug-of-war and Nykerk Cup competition, the college’s fraternities and sororities, and the Social Activities Committee which provides entertainment programming for the entire campus.

Involvement in such organizations, Awad noted, is ideally enjoyable while also providing lessons in organization, leadership, conflict resolution, event planning, group dynamics and decision making.

“They’re meeting social needs, where people are meeting new folks, creating friendships,” she said. “But beyond that the students involved are learning a lot of different skill sets or about themselves or from other people.”

“I think that all of those things can come together to complement what they learn in the classroom in a practical way,” she said.

The opportunity to get involved was important to junior Phillip Guajardo of Kentwood, Mich., as he conducted his college search. Since last year he has been president of La Raza Unida, Hope’s Hispanic Student Organization. He appreciates the skills that he’s learned along the way.

“Hope provides the opportunity to join activities that expand both your interests and your perspectives in a number of different ways,” he said. “I feel like my involvement has taught me to appreciate and savor my Hispanic heritage more than I did previously. I also see that bringing my ideas and talents to an organization can actually make a difference.”

Leadership, exploring interests, service and friendships are key lessons of activities outside the classroom at Hope. Above, members of the Alpha Gamma Phi sorority introduce themselves during this year’s Fall Student Activities Fair.

“One of the biggest things I have gained through being Greek is close relationships with my sorority sisters—there is a different level of bond that comes through being sisters, and that has been an incredible support system to me throughout my years at Hope.”

- Karla Helvie ’08, Kappa Delta Chi
“Being a pre-med student, I know the importance of working well with others and being an effective communicator.” Guajardo said. “Before I had a chance to become very involved in La Raza Unida, I don’t believe that I was very effective at either characteristic. I believe that I have improved in both leading and communication, but I still know that I have some work to do in both categories.” Senior Karla Helve of Ann Arbor, Mich., has valued not only the friendships but also the lessons she has learned through the Kappa Delta Chi sorority and her work as a member of the Panhelicon Council, the governing body of all of Hope’s sororities.

“Of the biggest things I have gained through being Greek is close relationships with my sorority sisters—there is a different level of bond that comes through being sisters, and that has been an incredible support system to me throughout my years at Hope,” she said. “In the same vein, but with a broader perspective, I have also gained relationships with other Greeks who I otherwise would never have met, as well as relationships with Hope faculty. This has been a great blessing in that I have gained a wide variety of perspectives on being Greek, being a student at Hope and life in general. I am also gaining invaluable leadership experience, both through my organization and within the larger contexts of sorority life and Greek life at Hope.”

Senior Matt Wixson of Albion, Mich., has been involved in numerous aspects of campus life.

“It was actually one of my biggest considerations,” he said. “Where can I get a good academic education as well as do these fun things and be involved in things that are important to me and play a significant role in them?”

The student-organized Dance Marathon fundraiser for Helen DeVos Children’s Hospital has been one such activity. “It’s a lot of fun, but it’s fun with a purpose,” he said.

He initially participated in the 24-hour event as a dancer, and later led the morale team. He sees the learning in the experience, reality, that it “definitely helped shape my leadership skills.”

“When you have to develop an agenda for a meeting or schedule hundreds of morales, it’s a hard process but a fun process,” Wixson said. “It’s made me more organized.”

In its broadest sense, “co-curricular” is everything that takes place outside the classroom, and when viewed that way the opportunities for involvement and learning become nearly limitless. For example:

Residential life at Hope is approached intentionally, with the staff—the same 100 student resident assistants who are themselves learning as part of the process—working to create a positive learning environment by building activities around themes including community, diversity, and intellectual, physical and spiritual development.

“When I talk with the IAs to begin the year, one of the words that I use is ‘intentional,’” said Dr. John Johnson, who is assistant dean of students and director of residential life and housing. “As we work with students, one of the things that we try to be intentional about is, ‘How are they going to learn from this experience?’”

The residential life component is critical to the Phelps Scholars Program, through which students reflect on diversity issues through courses they take together, additional activities and living as community in Scott Hall. “We look at a lot of mischief, and one of the things that was really clear to the planning committee was that programs that connect the academic program with residential life are far more powerful and effective than just academic programs or just residential programs,” said Dr. Chuck Green, who is director of the program and a professor of psychology.

“We find that when students are talking about the same things, they talk about it in the residence hall late at night,” he said. “When we ask people what they will take away from the program, it is really remarkable how many mention a late-night conversation.”

In addition to being woven throughout the fabric of the institution, the college’s Christian heritage finds expression explicitly through the activities of the Campus Ministry programs. The three weekday Chapel services and the Sunday evening “Gathering” regularly host some 1,000 students, with 30 to 40 involved as worship leaders. Hundreds of students participate in outreach, including with local ministries and through the annual spring break mission trip program. Members of the staff also walk alongside students in their faith journeys in ongoing discipleship and relationship activities such as small-group meetings.

“When you’re dealing with faith and development spiritually, sometimes it’s difficult to have indexes,” said the Rev. Trepye Johnson, who is the Hinga-Boersma Dean of the Chapel. “I would hope that the intentional development that we offer would help students merge faith and action together.”

What we want to do is provide energy and meaningful experiences that provide holistic integration, that Johnson said. “I see what we do as working in a symbiotic relationship with student development and the academic mission.”

Participation in collaborative research with faculty members gives students a unique opportunity to apply their classroom, and to see where those lessons are headed. More than 180 participated in research in the sciences full-time this summer, with many also engaged in research part-time during the school year.

“It’s the best way to educate students,” said Dr. Moses Lee, dean for the natural and applied sciences and professor of chemistry. “You take ownership of a research problem that has never been done before. You have to think critically. You have to read deeply.”

Involvement in sports offers another set of lessons for the hundreds of Hope students who participate in the college’s intercollegiate and club programs.

“You learn a lot of good things, like unselfishness, discipline and self-sacrifice, and know that you’re representing a community beyond yourself,” said Professor Ray Smith, who is professor of kinesiology and director of athletics for men. “This is in addition to getting a top-flight education.”

“I’m very encouraged about the kinds of things that we’re doing with students here and of course the caliber of students that we have,” he said. “We have just outstanding kids here that are going to make a difference in their lifetimes—in their homes, their vacations and ultimately in their communities.”

The lessons often link back to the students’ careers preparation in tangible ways.

“Students who have been productive with publications and presentations have a better chance of finding employment or getting into the graduate school of their choice,” Dr. Lee said. “You want to find a student or a worker who has a proven track record.”

Dale Austin, director of career services, has found the same true more broadly.

“Employees recognize that students don’t have a significant amount of relevant professional experience,” Austin said. “One of the ways in which employers can gauge quality candidates is through co-curricular involvement in a leadership role.”

The myriad lessons of co-curricular involvement aren’t new, and have been made available in Hope students’ lives for generations. In recent years, however, the college has been placing increased emphasis on helping the lessons gained through co-curricular involvement connect with students’ academic and life plans.

Since 2003, the Crossroads Project has worked with departments across campus and organized additional activities to help students think theologically about their calling and life. More recently, the college has established the Center for Faithful Leadership to enhance the college’s emphasis on training servant-leaders.

“It’s faithful to God, it’s faithful to ourselves, finding out what we believe in, finding out what passions we have, finding out what assets we have, and thinking about how we can develop those,” said Dr. Steve VanderVeen, who is the center’s director as well as a professor of management.

The center’s activities include retreats and seminars focused on leadership, and roundtables so that students can share their experiences.

“The Center for Faithful Leadership is trying to work with Multicultural Life and Student Development and integrate leadership practice with leadership theory and reflection,” Dr. VanderVeen said. “We’re trying to create an internship-like experience out of the experiences that students are already having by integrating the theoretical component.”