The agreement formalized what had already been a positive relationship between Hope and the ODC that dates back to the center’s founding nearly 10 years ago. “They were very welcoming to us from the very beginning,” said Dr. K. Gregory Murray, professor of biology at Hope. Throughout the center’s history, Hope students and faculty members have used the ODC for a variety of experiences, including tagging fish, hunking birds, live trapping and surveying small mammals, gathering seeds and monitoring insects and plant species through the center.

“They get hands-on experience — like a real ecologist,” said Theron Williams ’98, ODC’s executive director. “That’s what sets people apart when they try to go and get a job.” Dr. Murray agrees.

“They learn how a nature center runs. A lot of them are going to end up in that business, doing interpretive work, working with the public. That’s a huge opportunity for them,” Dr. Murray said.

The expanded relationship with the center reflects an emphasis on teaching students through involvement in collaborative research with faculty members that has been an educational philosophy at the college for more than half a century. The late Dr. Gerrit Van Zandt ’18, who taught chemistry at the college from 1923 to 1964, is widely recognized for developing research-based learning at Hope in its modern sense. More than 100 years ago, biologist Dr. Samuel O. Mant had designed research laboratory space for the college’s Van Raalte Hall, which opened in 1901.

Hope has received recognition in a variety of ways for its emphasis on undergraduate research. For the past eight years, since the category debuted, the America’s Best Colleges guide published by U.S. News and World Report has included Hope on its listing of institutions that are exceptional for their emphasis on undergraduate research and creative projects. Hope ranked fourth in the nation when the category debuted in 2003; the institutions are no longer ranked, but only about three dozen are on the list each year. The guide also includes Hope among the top 100 liberal arts colleges in the U.S.

Among other indicators, Hope was one of only 10 liberal arts institutions nationally recognized for innovation and excellence in science instruction by the National Science Foundation (NSF) with an “Award for the Integration of Research and Education” in 1998. In addition, the bulk of the resources that support the college’s research program in the sciences come through competitive research grants from external sources such as the NSF, National Institutes of Health (NIH), Department of Homeland Security, private foundations and corporations.

Dr. Murray agrees. "My students get the opportunity to take their research ideas and form them into K-12 lessons."

"They learn how to teach children every bit as effectively outdoors as you do indoors," Dr. Winnett-Murray added. "Our students have an opportunity to see really good role models and model that behavior to children."

Ingrid Slette, a sophomore from Holland, Mich., did an internship at the ODC for lab work when she took Biology 260 - Organismal Biology – during winter semester last academic year. She says the experience tapped into her love of the outdoors and made the lessons learned in the classroom more real.

"It was fun to get out of the class and actually see what you’re learning in nature," Slette said. "I think it’s a real good way to do research and apply the concepts you’ve learned in class."

Dr. Winnett-Murray says she sees part of her role as letting her colleagues at Hope know about the opportunities that are available for faculty members in all departments to use ODC for class work and research.

"I think we’ve just tapped the surface of what things are going to come," Dr. Winnett-Murray said. "We want to see this as an extension of Hope’s campus that everyone can use, and we’re just starting to do that."