

*Service
Learning*

SERVES

Dual Purposes

Students gain educational experiences;
community gains loving laborers

by Jessica Baltzersen '13

In the quiet uninhabited basement of the Mount's library, amongst shelves of old chemical abstracts and donated literature, sat sophomore English student Josh Zeller, as he cataloged a rare collection of books transported from Alaska in the care of a Mount faculty member.

Meanwhile, during the same 2014 fall semester, Jessica Davis, sophomore special-education major, faced the challenge of tutoring two students at Holmes Junior/Senior High School in Covington. Founded in 1853, Kentucky's oldest public high school is also the state's worst-performance-rated school, where one in every 10 students is homeless.

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– Josh Zeller, sophomore

Although Josh and Jessica’s individual experiences were vastly different, they both were a part of the Mount’s Service Learning program, where students encounter invaluable educational opportunities that enrich their academic knowledge base and their lives.

“Through service learning, a student’s learning goes beyond simply sitting in a classroom and absorbing information,” says Joel Thierstein, executive vice president of Academic Affairs. “They’re engaging and participating in the problem-solving of society.”

The purpose of the program is for students to apply their classroom knowledge to volunteer work, so they can gain both a hands-on experience and the opportunity to work for the betterment of the community in meaningful ways. In one semester, each student works a minimum of 30 service hours. Once the job is complete, students present their learning outcomes to their class where they reflect on what they have learned and how they have grown personally.

“Presenting in front of a class is always nerve-wracking for me,” says Zeller, “but I gave details of my project and then took questions. The question-and-answer segment was what made the presentation so positive, because people asked a lot of questions. I was glad that they were so interested in what I had to say about my experience!”

“Essentially, service-learning students theorize in the classroom, complete service related to academic content and demonstrate learning through reflection,” says Service Learning Coordinator Keith Lanser.

With his cataloging project, Zeller found himself in the midst of a rich anthology of butterfly species, science and poetry books. The late Kenelm Philip, butterfly expert who resided in Fairbanks, Alaska, left part of his literature collection to close friend Jill Russell, Ph.D. ’96, associate professor of biology at the Mount, after he passed away in March 2014.

The two met in the summer of 2010 when Russell taught at the University of Alaska Fairbanks (UAF). She inquired about an unusual butterfly and was told to ask “The Alaska Butterfly Guy,” or Dr. Philip.

“We immediately became fast friends, and I had dinner with him once a week ever since,” says Russell. “He was a brilliant man, who loved to share the newest scientific information he had just read about. He was the best friend anyone could ever want.”

Philip’s collection contained more than 10,000 books, including first-edition poetry, science fantasy and children’s literature. The books were distributed in various directions. Many of the most valuable books from his collection were sent to his family in New England. Some books were donated to the UAF library, and others were given to the public library in Fairbanks where they have since been sold, earning about \$20,000 to fund the library.

Student Josh Zeller says that interviewing associate biology professor Jill Russell, Ph.D. ’96 about her friend and butterfly expert Kenelm Philip was an exciting part of his service learning project in which he cataloged Philip’s rare book collection.

The remainder of the books came to the Mount to be cataloged by Zeller. “We were asked by the executor of the estate to take care of Ken’s book collection and to do what we wanted with them. So, after the books went to the UAF library and to the family, I asked that the remaining books be sent down [to the Mount] to catalog them for the estate so that a dollar value could be listed,” Russell says.

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Learning Outside the Classroom

After the books arrived at the Mount, Zeller took bibliographic inventory and rated the condition of Philip’s collection. The cataloging included searching for the possible worth of each book and making note of general information such as the title, author and publication date of each book. The content from his Advanced Composition course prepared him for research methods and other literary practices he used during his work in the library.

“It was exciting to learn outside of the classroom,” Zeller notes. “Classroom learning is essential, but what I did was so different, unlike anything that I’ve ever experienced. When doing something hands-on, you get to apply your knowledge, which I haven’t experienced in a classroom as often.”

The money from the sold books will go towards a scholarship fund that has been set up by Philip’s family at UAF. The first scholarship was awarded to a graduate student who volunteered closely with Philip in the last year of his life.

A fond memory Zeller had through his experience was interviewing Russell about the owner of the book collection.

“You learn a lot about a person by the types of books they own,” Zeller says. “I got to learn a lot more about [Philip] who was an essential expert on butterflies in Alaska and who led an interesting and rich life, filled with books and poetry.”

“Josh has such an appreciation of the collection,” Russell adds, “that it was very rewarding to see how much pleasure he got from working with the books. It was a win-win situation.”

Paul Jenkins, director of library services, mentored student Josh Zeller through cataloging a rare book collection and conducting other research during his service learning experience last fall.

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– Josh Zeller, sophomore

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– Jessica Davis,
sophomore

Throughout the semester, Zeller worked closely with Paul Jenkins, director of Library Services, who mentored him during the cataloging process. Zeller also had the opportunity to work one-on-one with Jenkins on various research projects, including an essay on the rise of e-books in libraries.

The Mount is one-of-a-kind in that it fosters a close collegial relationship between expert faculty members and students. “Mount students bond with faculty members in ways that students at larger universities aren’t able to,” Thierstein says. “Our smaller institution allows students to be guided by a faculty member personally — which is a critical component to a successful education.”

“I really liked that I got to know Mr. Jenkins and Dr. Russell better after working on this project with them,” Zeller says. “They are both wonderful people who are so passionate about what they do, a passion I know that I want to apply to my own career.”

“Working with these books and learning to catalog and research taught me that working with books is something I want to do for a career,” Zeller says. “I’ve been thinking about pursuing library science for a long time — but my service learning experience definitely strengthened my desire to pursue this field. I now feel more sure than ever before that I want to become a librarian.”

The Challenges are Service

“The ultimate purpose of the service learning here at the Mount is for our students to develop values, skills and knowledge that will empower them to become community leaders who actively work to make Greater Cincinnati a more inclusive and equitable place to live,” Lanser says.

Jessica Davis experienced up-close the hardships that come with service and the personal gratification from making a change in the community. She worked for three hours after school, tutoring two middle-school-aged children in fluency, comprehension and overall reading skills.

“Holmes High School is in a very high poverty area,” she explains. “Sometimes children would go home hungry, which was really sad to see. Working with students who don’t get fed during the weekend and depend on the afterschool program so they can get fed dinner was eye opening.

“I just don’t feel comfortable talking about everything that I saw at Holmes Middle School,” she says. “The students made great progress for the time I was there. And yes, I did grow a relationship with the two who I worked with.

“It makes me want to become a special education teacher even more,” she admits. “I loved the experience to a certain extent.”

“ The value in service learning is the ability to work in the field and apply knowledge to helping the world’s problems. The key element is the ability to reach out and touch somebody. Higher education’s purpose is to produce great learners — and learning happens through reflection. ”

– Keith Lanser, Service
Learning coordinator

“Service learning isn’t meant to be easy, because our society’s greatest challenges don’t have simple solutions,” Lanser adds. “Service learning can be extremely difficult for students, especially when they are grappling with the realities of inequality for the very first time.”

“The value in service learning,” Thierstein adds, “is the ability to work in the field and apply knowledge to helping the world’s problems. The key element is the ability to reach out and touch somebody.”

By helping a student learn to read, Davis was able to effectively teach first-hand the knowledge from her Theoretical Perspectives and Foundations in Literacy class. “It was really awesome when I knew what was happening because I had just talked about it in class. Seeing my own students’ ‘light bulbs’ go off when they got something was an amazing feeling,” Davis says.

When taking the service-learning credit, it’s not certain what each individual’s learning outcome will be. Some students deepen their academic comprehension, while others develop a greater understanding of social problems, a stronger appreciation for cultural diversity, or an enhanced sense of community. But what is certain, is that when students complete their service hours, they gain insight and knowledge through the intentional, systematic reflection of their experiences.

“Higher education’s purpose is to produce great learners — and learning happens through reflection,” Lanser says.

Personal Advising for Health Professions

The Mount operates under the principle that a personal connection between students and faculty is the foundation for students’ academic growth. The Health Professions Advising Committee (HPAC) is an additional service offered to students seeking guidance in entering professional health care careers that require skills and experiences beyond what they received while completing their undergraduate degrees. Undergraduate students in the School of Behavioral and Natural Sciences and the School of Health Sciences work with academic advisors for their majors, as well as an HPAC advisor, to design a course of study that is tailored to suit their own specific career goals.

HPAC advisors are expert faculty members who assist students one-on-one with insight on career overviews, graduate program applications, interviewing processes, shadowing opportunities for various careers and other beneficial advice for furthering their academic careers. “We offer our professional services to help and guide students along the way,” says Tracy Reed-Kessler, biology professor and HPAC co-director. “Because we work closely with our students, we know them very well and what their specific goals are. That’s what sets us apart from larger universities.”

HPAC prepares students for admission to professional programs in athletic training, chiropractic medicine, dentistry, medicine, nursing, occupational therapy, optometry, pharmacy, physical therapy, physician assistant, podiatry, public health and veterinary science. **M**



Far from easy, Jessica Davis’ service learning project was hands-on training that helped her make a firm commitment to becoming a special education teacher.