When disaster strikes, people naturally want to help out. Yet, hundreds of groups as well as individuals every day are in need of some sort of assistance. It could be a nonprofit agency on the verge of financial collapse or a family unexpectedly rendered homeless. Volunteers quietly come forward in times like these, work hard and expect nothing in return. Instilling that sense of giving back to the community is a life lesson at the core of the University of Oklahoma mission and, in turn, at Price College of Business.

Imparting the importance of philanthropy, along with the many academic disciplines required of well-rounded business students, is not just a part of the Price College curriculum. To Dean Kenneth Evans, it is fundamental. “What a firm is looking for is, yes, have our students developed skill sets, can they write a business plan, did the marketing succeed,” Evans said. “But they are also interested in knowing what kind of impact these students have had on the communities in which they reside.”

To that end, Price business students participate in a number of volunteer activities. Some are campus-wide, such as the annual spring Big Event, where thousands of OU students spend a Saturday working for community organizations across the Oklahoma City metropolitan area. Other philanthropic projects are created, organized and executed solely by Price students.

Last spring, for example, the Graduate Business Association inaugurated a program they called “Suit Up,” which provided OU students and the Norman community an opportunity to buy affordable, gently used professional clothing. Proceeds were donated to the United Way.
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“This was a big undertaking, for which our students gained support from local dry cleaners and retailers,” said Gina Amundson, director of graduate programs. “Our students collected clothing, promoted and then hosted the event.”

Amundson said graduate programs emphasize that giving back to one’s community is a priority even when academics are demanding. It is part of the program’s culture. Each semester, several volunteer opportunities are available for students. If the project involves earning money, students vote on the recipient of the proceeds.

Eric Ellsworth, president of GBA and a 2009 MBA candidate, said he believes despite a busy academic schedule, one can find the time to perform community service.

“I was taught that life is strange and anyone can be dealt a setback, whether it be financially, physically or emotionally,” he said. “There will come a time when you need the assistance of others. Our association tries to think outside the box and also work on projects that tie into our MBA experience, like the ‘Suit Up’ sale of professional clothing last spring.”

Students participating in the First Fidelity Bank Integrated Business Core learn practical lessons of business life while donating thousands of dollars and hours to area charities.

“The First Fidelity IBC program is a cornerstone program that gives students not only hands-on business experience but also an opportunity to give back to the community through philanthropic efforts,” said Shelly Grunsted, director of the program and clinical lecturer of legal studies. “Since 1995, our efforts have produced approximately $840,000 in proceeds and more than 38,000 hours of sweat equity.”

Students choose deserving charities at the start of each semester through a service fair where nonprofit groups set up booths and provide students with information on their particular needs. “Companies” are formed by students, who develop business plans for a product, which they sell, donating profits to local nonprofits. All aspects of conceptualizing, developing and operating a business are covered during the 16-week project.

“Most students who come through IBC have not encountered suffering like the individuals they choose to help serve,” Grunsted said. “Many students will tell you that of all the experiences they’ve had in college so far that will always stay with them, it’s working with these deserving charities and realizing they are affecting lives.”

Philanthropy is a long-established pillar of the JCPenney Leadership Center and its director, Cindy Lopez, who works to sensitize her high-achieving students to the needs of the community, thereby teaching them to use their talents for the greater good.

“Some of our students come to us having been involved in service organizations while others might be encountering philanthropy for the first time,” Lopez said. “For both groups, we try to show them how important
philanthropy is and what role it plays in our society. It is hoped that they will continue such work when they occupy roles as future business leaders.”

Each semester, students are required to participate in some type of community service. Last fall, JCPenney Leadership students worked at East Main Place, a Norman homeless shelter. There, 65 students cleaned, gardened, organized and categorized supplies and moved furniture.

“Whatever they needed, we did it,” Lopez said. “It was a great experience, and the students loved it. We all felt that we were able to make a real difference.”

For Kaylynn Dean, a senior JCPenney leadership associate, volunteerism was not something with which she was unfamiliar when she arrived at OU, as she regularly worked with her Tulsa church. She has learned that her efforts do not go unnoticed while working at East Main Place and serving as co-chair of Eggstravaganza, an annual Easter egg hunt with other activities for the community, at OU’s Sam Noble Oklahoma Museum of Natural History.

“I’ve always felt that it’s important to go out and do things that will help the local community, and both East Main Place and Eggstravaganza especially made me feel that JCPenney Leadership’s work was appreciated,” she said. “We heard back from several people who reside at East Main, and they let us know how much they appreciated us. At Eggstravaganza, I had several parents come up to me after the event to say ‘thanks,’ which meant so much.”

Dean added that participating in these events has reinforced her feelings that community work is necessary and that she is capable of making it happen.

The Management Information Student Association also makes philanthropy a part of their activities. When a tornado struck the southeastern Oklahoma town of Lone Grove in February, MISSA sprang into action. Gathering everything from sanitary items to stuffed animals during a donation drive, students headed to the tornado-ravaged town within days of the event, $600 in donated goods in tow. A week later, they returned with even more needed items purchased with funds donated to their relief effort, as well as home-baked goods.

“It was amazing to see how our students took the initiative and stepped up to help people right in our own backyard,” said Laku Chidambaram, division director of Management Information Systems. “They organized the drive, collected food and supplies, raised money and used that to buy other items that were needed.”

Working at the first Graduate Business Association Suit Up event are, from left, Alison Wilson, Derek Campbell and Nicole Heyland.
Directly helping people, particularly those who had lost everything, had a profound impact on the students, Chidambaram added. “They didn’t just collect money and send it along, but got personally involved, even baking cookies and cupcakes for them. Seeing how appreciative Lone Grover residents were gave them a great deal in return.”

The 2009-2010 school year will find members of the Price College Student Business Association planning their contributions to the community, according to Robert Harper, director of undergraduate professional development and SBA advisor. He said the group has made planning meaningful philanthropic activities one of its major goals for the upcoming school year.

“It is the SBA’s desire to help our future business leaders embrace the opportunity to help others in society,” he said. “We look forward to participating in multiple philanthropic events throughout the year involving the students of Price College.”

“It is critical for a business school to educate its students on the value of being involved in the life and support of their community,” said Dean Evans.

“If a business school does not have a commitment to be a part of their community, they miss out on teaching students what it means to be a business professional,” he said. “What I hope all of these programs in our college capture, and what our students carry away from their experience here, is a sense of their responsibility to contribute to society. Further, if this is collectively embraced and sustained, it is amazing what these students can accomplish. Look at the impact of the First Fidelity IBC program as one illustration.”

By that measure, Price College is well on its way to graduating students with a broad sense of what it means to be a good citizen, wherever they are working in the world.

Hearts for Hearing Sees First-Hand Benefits From First Fidelity IBC Program

Like working with a “well-oiled machine” is how one local nonprofit describes its experience working with students in the First Fidelity Integrated Business Core program. Oklahoma City-based Hearts for Hearing director of development Kris Taylor said she has found her experience with Price students to be exceptionally positive.

“They were very professional while understanding that Hearts for Hearing needs financial support versus sweat equity,” she said. “We provide the first set of hearing aids for babies and children and teach them how to listen and talk. Good hearing technology is expensive, and the students understood that. Asking them to raise funds by selling a product was terrific for us.”

Chosen from among a number of area nonprofit organizations during a nonprofit fair in fall 2008, Hearts for Hearing received approximately $3,600 from funds IBC students raised during their project executed during the fall 2008 semester.

“Once students picked their nonprofit from the fair, they were off and running,” Taylor said. “We received periodic updates, and I always felt comfortable that things were moving along. I found them to be willing to work with us while doing the best job they could.”

Formed in 2005, Taylor said Hearts for Hearing is a relatively young nonprofit. Therefore, she appreciates the support from the community and also the opportunity to share the nonprofit’s story through the First Fidelity IBC program. Twice selected to benefit from the program, Taylor said both experiences were terrific.

“These students are learning great life skills, and as a parent of two college-age children myself, I know that the professionalism these students learn will carry them far,” Taylor said. “Whoever gets to employ them will be thrilled.”

First Fidelity IBC students paint a house while working with Habitat for Humanity.