

# Live *and* Learn

The Center for Experiential Learning helps students find their strengths, passions, and livelihoods.

By Amy Boxrud '89

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROBB LONG AND BETH ROONEY

When the St. Olaf Class of 2010 graduates in May, approximately 33 percent will go on to graduate school. Another 10 percent will commit to full-time volunteer programs such as AmeriCorps or Lutheran Volunteer Corps. The remaining 57 percent will enter the job market. For many, the decision about a future direction will be influenced — either directly or indirectly — by the college's Center for Experiential Learning (CEL), where students and faculty create meaningful connections between the classroom and the outside world.

"One of the things [at which] we have to be excellent is helping students discern what their gifts and talents are and how best to use them in a way that will support them. That place at St. Olaf is the Center for Experiential Learning," says President David R. Anderson '74.

Founded in 2000, the CEL is much more than an enhanced career center. Its myriad resources and collaborative programs offer students a holistic approach to exploring their vocations and careers. The connections made from the classroom to the outside world take many forms: academic courses, case studies, travel opportunities, internships, workshops and seminars, as well as one-

on-one counseling and reflection, with each experience leading students closer to finding their gifts, passions, and future livelihoods. The CEL presents these opportunities to students in four major programs: Career Connections, Academic Internships, Civic Engagement, and Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship.

St. Olaf students are encouraged to begin exploration early in their college careers. Economics and Asian studies professor Bruce Dalgaard, CEL's executive director, calls the center's method of vocational discernment a four-year process, inextricably linked to the academic work of the college. "It's a journey," says Dalgaard. "The CEL is the vehicle that allows the journey."

CEL Director Patricia Smith knows that sometimes "the process of vocational discernment may take years to play out," making the wisdom gleaned and skills learned from the CEL all the more valuable to students later in their lives.

As the proverb says, if you "give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." In that respect, the CEL is doing more than helping students get into graduate school or land that first job. The lessons learned in the CEL will continue to nourish graduates throughout their lives.



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*Mike Dawson, Dittmann Center*

## Right on Target

“In the spring of my sophomore year, I lost two internships,” says Mike Dawson ’10. After the first two opportunities he had lined up for the summer fell through, the economics major turned to the CEL. With the help of the CEL staff, Dawson tweaked his resume, learned to write more effective cover letters, and practiced interviewing. The result was an internship with ID Insight, a company in Northfield that develops identification verification software.

Also through the CEL, Dawson participated in the General Mills marketing case challenge, an opportunity for teams to work on real-world marketing challenges, present their ideas to a panel of business leaders, learn about careers in marketing, sales, finance, and promotions, and connect with Ole alumni. His team’s challenge was to find a target market for a new cereal, suggest a price, and develop a promotional plan for the product. “I learned how complex a seemingly simple problem really can be,” says Dawson.

The experience he gained and the relationships he made during the project were invaluable. That’s when Dawson met Gretchen Johnson ’97, whom he encountered again while interviewing with General Mills for an internship the following year. While the internship didn’t work out, a mentorship between Johnson and Dawson developed, lasting throughout the rest of Dawson’s college career. “Gretchen has been a big help in working with me to improve my resume and giving advice on ways to gain experience in the world of finance,” says Dawson. Following Johnson’s advice and using the skills he developed through the CEL, Dawson lined up a summer internship at Target Corp. following his junior year.

A first-generation college student, Dawson has enough credits to graduate a semester early this year. And while it’s a challenging time to be entering the job market, Dawson has a full-time job offer waiting for him at Target when he’s ready to begin working in March.

## Leaders for Social Change

A passion for social innovation led seniors Jenny Kramm and Maren Gelle to apply to the CEL's Leaders for Social Change (LSC) summer academic internship. The LSC internship supports students while they work at Northfield-area nonprofit organizations, allowing them to contribute to the local community and develop leadership skills necessary to foster social change.

Kramm's project was creating culturally sensitive experiential education for Northfield middle schooler's "at-risk" for not graduating from high school. Her plan, implemented through Northfield's Summer Plus program, featured service-learning activities in which students identified needs within their community, learned why those needs were not being met, and designed action plans. She earned additional support with a scholarship from the Jay and Rose Phillips Family Foundation, awarded to students who develop community service projects that benefit underserved populations in Minnesota.

Gelle developed an environmental education curriculum, working with both the local school district and Northfield's Healthy Community Initiative. The experience was transformative. "The LSC program shaped the trajectory of my

college career," says Gelle, who credits the internship for sparking her continued work in social innovation.

Following her LSC internship, Gelle's focus in the CEL has been in social innovation and entrepreneurship. As a Johnson Social Innovation summer intern, Gelle had the opportunity to design and develop an innovative and resourceful approach to a social problem in the Twin Cities area. Her work with the public schools in two CEL-sponsored internships has influenced her decision to pursue graduate school studies in American History. "My experiences helped me realize that I really like being a teacher and being in front of students," says Gelle.

Kramm, a biology student with a management studies concentration, was one of two St. Olaf students selected to be 2009 Peace Scholars and spent last summer in Chiapas, Mexico, with scholars from each of the Nobel Peace Prize Forum colleges, studying issues related to peace, justice, democracy, and human rights. After graduation, Kramm hopes to spend time abroad strengthening her understanding of the Spanish language and Latino culture. Her long-term goal is to manage a nonprofit organization that helps meet the needs of immigrant Latino communities.

ROBB LONG



Maren Gelle (left) and Jenny Kramm, Rølvaag Library





*Hannah Clark, Downtown Chicago*

## Transferring Skills

As a peer advisor in the CEL, Hannah Clark '09 was the first point of contact for students looking to use the resources of the center. In her second year in this role, she became an expert on applying to graduate schools, leading workshops, and holding office hours for her peers. "That was one of the most formative experiences I had at St. Olaf," says Clark. "It taught me to work with different types of people and to be a problem-solver in a real-time situation."

In addition to helping others, Clark herself took advantage of several opportunities sponsored by the CEL. A biology major, she was drawn to experiential learning programs at the Mayo Clinic. Clark worked with a team of business and biology students as an intern for the Mayo Innovation Scholars program, evaluating and marketing a newly patented medical device. Later, as a Mayo summer undergraduate research fellow, she worked as a research assistant in Mayo's Nicotine Research Center.

Clark was also a recipient of the Kloeck-Jensen Scholarship for Peace and Justice at St. Olaf. This funding enabled

her to spend an Interim at the School for Social Entrepreneurs (SSE) in London, which trains students to use their creative and entrepreneurial abilities more fully to benefit society. "It was my first foray into the nonprofit world and I fell in love with it," she says.

"There was a real value in living and working in London for an extended period of time," Clark says. "I would love to go back some day and perhaps work in an organization similar to SSE."

Since graduation, Clark has worked as an AmeriCorps VISTA member for the Taproot Foundation in Chicago — an organization that strengthens other nonprofits by engaging business professionals in pro bono service. Her experiences in the CEL prepared her for her current position as a program fellow for Taproot. "I'm in a very similar role," says Clark. "As a peer advisor at St. Olaf, I was a resource for students. Now I'm finding resources and advocating for the needs of the Chicago nonprofit community."

## Helping Others; Finding Herself

In helping others discern their calling, Miriam Samuelson '08 solidified her own. Working as a Lilly Endowment intern in the CEL after graduation helped her find her own career path and expand her definition of vocation.

For many students, their first exposure to the CEL comes when they assess their strengths and interests through the Career Connections program. Reflecting on her work in Career Connections as a Lilly intern, Samuelson enjoyed working on a process called vocational discernment with students one-on-one or in small groups. "I could help students find a spark, a strength, an interest, or a vocational inkling, and help them find the tools to realize their visions," she says.

While Samuelson found working with students on a micro level in the Career Connections program rewarding, she also enjoyed helping students tackle what she calls the

"big conversations, big ideas" with her work in Civic Engagement. The highlight of this work was her role in developing an integrative studies class, where as part of a team that included faculty members and CEL staff, Samuelson helped plan and participate in a course that challenged students to create social change projects ranging from local environmental efforts with youth to international health initiatives.

"Working in the CEL solidified my vocational calling to help students become the people they are capable of becoming," she says, referencing the words of American philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Currently an admissions counselor for St. Olaf, Samuelson now has the perfect vantage point from which to steer incoming students toward the CEL, so they can begin taking advantage of these resources from day one.

ROBB LONG



*Miriam Samuelson, Buntrock Commons Plaza*

**Alumni Connections** The CEL sponsors a number of events each year to bring alumni and students face-to-face. Each year "Oles Gone Global" brings alumni who have launched global careers to campus to provide information to the growing number of students who want to establish international careers or focus on global issues. The "Business and the Liberal Arts" forum in past years has brought nationally-recognized leaders, several of them alumni, and alumni from Twin Cities companies together with students to discuss how the liberal arts provides a "moral compass" in the business world.

St. Olaf President David Anderson '74 would like to see even more connections between students and alumni in the future. "We have almost unimaginable resources that we can bring to bear on the vocational quest of our current students," says Anderson. "I think we have only begun to tap that vast reservoir." 🦉

AMY BOXRUD '89 is a writer and editor living in Northfield.

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