Aesop would be pleased to know that community service and the newer concept of service learning are thriving at Cal Poly.

Some students perform community service as part of extracurricular activities; some do it to fulfill course requirements. All seem to come away from the experience feeling they “got more than they gave.”

Like nutrition senior Jessica Zucca and recent graduate Natalie Denning (NUTR '05). As part of the course on nutrition in aging, they volunteered at an Alzheimer’s care facility. Both say they learned much more than the nutritional needs and eating habits of the elderly.

They helped set up tables, talked to the residents, got them juice and coffee. “If someone was having a difficult time, I helped them eat,” Zucca says. “I was able to get to know the residents. I listened to stories about their lives and childhoods. I always left in a better mood than when I came in. They made my day a little better.”

Denning worked alongside the personal care assistants during mealtimes and during activities, reading newspapers to residents, playing cards, and participating during exercise hour.

“I am so grateful to have had that opportunity. The seniors were absolutely wonderful. I believe that I learned and got more out of volunteering and helping the residents then they got from me. They taught me so much about the importance of life and how special family is,” Denning said.

The nutrition in aging course offers a wide range of organizations and services in which students can help, says Professor Louise Berner. They include delivering meals to homebound seniors, conducting food and nutrition activities at senior housing and adult daycare locations, and assisting people with Alzheimer’s disease in a skilled-nursing facility at mealtime.

Both the student community services program and the community-based learning initiative fall under the domain of Cal Poly’s Community Center, directed by Stephan Lamb. Student community services pairs student volunteers with organizations that aid the homeless, help beautify the environment, work to create a safer campus, mentor and motivate at-risk teenagers, and aim to enhance the life of adults with mental disabilities.

Community-based learning, or service learning, is a natural fit with Cal Poly’s learn-by-doing philosophy. As part of their course work, students work with agencies that are compatible with their academic goals.

Theoretically, service learning enables
students to gain experience and glean information that enhance classroom learning, says Professor Jean Williams, who teaches the politics of poverty class. Students learn about poverty and responses to poverty in the classroom and through service. Each learning component helps students to make sense of and analyze what they read, see, hear and experience in others.

Williams started the class to give students an opportunity to hear diverse views on the causes and consequences of poverty. "By interacting with homeless people, students gain an understanding of homelessness and poverty from a variety of perspectives. At the same time, community organizations are gaining through the work of students," Williams says.

As part of the course, Leilanie Bruce, a graduate student studying public policy, spent the night at El Camino Homeless Organization (ECHO), an all-volunteer agency providing shelter to the homeless in participating Atascadero churches on a revolving basis. The night Bruce volunteered, 26 beds were available at the United Methodist Church.

Until lights out, the people staying the night can watch TV, play cards and just hang out, according to Bruce. Two Cal Poly students spend the night, taking turns staying awake.

"It was a great experience because I actually had a chance to interact with the homeless on a personal basis," Bruce says. "I listened to their stories and found that they all are not how people perceive them to be. They were all ages and came from all backgrounds. Some were in school and were just trying to find a way out of their plight."

Professor Williams hopes that the theoretical underpinnings of service learning are, in fact, working in practice. "My hope is that ECHO benefits through the assistance of student volunteers as much as students benefit through learning about homeless shelters and working with homeless people," she says.