



LEARN BY DOING GOOD

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BY STACIA MOMBURG

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WHEELCHAIR FOUNDATION

SOME SENIOR PROJECTS NEVER END, but few students create that situation by design. Marketing Professor Lynn Metcalf and her students in the Orfalea College of Business are the exception. A long-term senior project was exactly what they set out to do.

The result – now in its sixth generation – is a project that would be the envy of many companies. Is there another organization that thrives on 100 percent employee turnover every 33 weeks and still manages to top its previous year's revenue?

The Cal Poly Wheelchair Foundation is a campus fund-raising organization that works on behalf of the National Wheelchair Foundation. It's a relationship that dates back six years, when philanthropist, entrepreneur and founder of the national organization Jeff Behring spoke as part of the Orfalea College of Business's Distinguished Speaker Series.

Metcalf says she created the Cal Poly Wheelchair Foundation as a senior project because it has an array of real-world challenges and opportunities to engage her students. "As a fund-raising project it has a lot of marketing aspects – sales, media relations, graphics and advertising – that span the business spectrum."

With a background in international marketing, Metcalf also felt it was important to combine student service learning with





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exposure to the global market. And they would not only learn by doing – but learn by doing good.

Chris Cole, project manager for the inaugural 2001 team, learned the importance of teamwork and the power of making a difference in the world. “When we delivered a chair to a man who had been bedridden his entire life, the look of gratitude on his face touched me deeply. In that moment, I realized the importance of everything I had done up to that point,” said Cole. The team raised \$18,000 that initial year.

In 2006 the team raised \$66,000 and secured three containers of wheelchairs – 880 chairs – creating a record for the campus organization. Krista Couch, 2006 project manager, credits the extraordinary year to Metcalf’s influence. “Lynn was an amazing mentor and a constant source of encouragement. She helped hone my leadership skills – which I now incorporate each day.”

The students are not the only ones learning by doing in this venture. Metcalf says she’s learned a great deal as well. “In the first year, I had no idea where this would take us. In the second and third years, I spent a lot of time directing my students’ efforts. But in the fourth and fifth years, I’ve been completely hands-off,” she says. “When bright people have ideas and can

act on them within a framework, they’re bound for success.”

How successful has the Cal Poly Wheelchair Foundation been? Since its inception, the group has raised \$160,000 and delivered 2,133 wheelchairs to six countries. They have also received donations of clothing, shoes, school supplies and toiletries for orphanages and schools in Guatemala and Belize.

With 100 percent turnover each year, and virtually no training time, how do the students continue to outdo their predecessors? Perhaps because much of the training is virtual.

It’s all in the business model say the students. Each year’s team adds to the organization’s institutional knowledge through a Web site that archives templates, forms, instructions, and job roles and responsibilities. “We try to build on each employee’s individual ideas, experiences and passions and pass that information down to the next group,” Metcalf says.

This year’s Cal Poly Wheelchair Foundation hopes to raise almost \$70,000 to pay for and distribute another 880 chairs in Argentina.

The 2007 Gift of Mobility annual gala will take place April 14 in Pismo Beach. For more information about the Cal Poly Wheelchair Foundation, contact Metcalf at 805-756-2010 or wheelchairfoundation@calpoly.edu. □