

Measure of a Life

by Dr. David E. Payne

At Sam Houston State University, our school motto is “The measure of a life is its service.” We try to make that theme a part of the education we provide our students. To that end, we have courses that are designated as academic community engagement courses (ACE), which provide the students with enhanced service learning experiences. These are important parts of the education we provide. We hope our students will be not only technically competent, but also that they will have had an exposure to and appreciation of community involvement. Although important, we view these efforts as being incomplete. We would also like to see students develop an interest in volunteering in the absence of course-mandated community service.

To more directly encourage unrewarded service, we have dozens of clubs and organizations which have a central service component. Projects range from canning peanut butter at a church regional cannery to be given to the needy, to cleaning up after natural disasters, to acting as ambassadors for the University at various functions.

Our musicians are perhaps the most familiar with uncompensated service of any of our students. Students perform almost daily without compensation or class credit for the entertainment of University faculty and staff, community members, and dignitaries. I thought about this earlier this week when we had a dignitary visiting from Mexico and on the spur of the moment we provided an hour-long private concert with two pianists and a cellist.

The Sam Houston State School of Music has given service an international focus as our students have spent uncompensated and externally unrewarded time in the Philippines, Bolivia, and Mexico

in the last couple of years helping to establish music programs in those countries. In the Philippines they organized an effort to acquire, refurbish, and transport donated instruments to a desperately poor university allowing them to begin a music program. We provided organizational and curricular advice for the university and private lessons to beginning musicians in the program. In Mexico our faculty and students consulted, taught, provided instruments for, and supported a community’s effort to organize two community orchestras for impoverished grade school age students. Those orchestras have become tremendous successes and now have a full-time paid conductor. In Bolivia we support a blossoming regional orchestra movement. Our students have returned from their international service experiences saying that their lives have been forever changed.

Not all service needs to be done on such a large scale or be this remarkable. Let me give two examples of service given to our students. We have been blessed with several very gifted piano students from Russia and Romania. These students generally come with, and live on, less than a shoestring. When a faculty member discovered that one of her students was going to give a performance in blue jeans and a t-shirt because that was all he had, she and her husband bought a white shirt, a formal suit, dress shoes, a tie, and so on, so he could perform without embarrassment. The clothes, and more importantly the gesture, are treasures to the student. Another student arrived with only the clothes she was wearing. An alumna quickly held an apartment-warming party with friends of music so the student could have clothes and other basics of student life. Friends of the University were generous and the student is now housed with one of them and has sufficient resources to concentrate on her music.

Each of us, whether band leaders or performers or administrators, has the opportunity to provide uncompensated and unrecognized service to our students and their families. My own life as a young high school musician was touched and forever changed by the generous service and friendship of my band director. I remember him with reverence. Most of your students, like me, will not go on to become professional musicians; but all of them will become citizens. When we give our students service, we bless them and model for them what we hope they will become. When we help them serve, we ensure the tradition will continue; and we have not only made good music and good musicians, but good people. Often the times when service is needed are not convenient or the service requires some financial sacrifice on our part. But, it is true “The measure of a life is its service.”

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Dr. David Payne

Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Sam Houston State University since 1997. He was also Professor of Sociology with degrees from Brigham Young University and the University of North Carolina. During his time at SHSU, he led the Division of Academic Affairs with 519 faculty located in four college offering 91 undergraduate and 79 graduate degrees, including the ABC master’s degree. Dr. Payne attended ABC 2011, presented the graduation speech and carried the ABC icon flag during the 4th of July Concert.