In addition to building their resumés, a growing number of students are using their co-ops to build a more hopeful world.

By Karen Feldscher
They’re not tempted by the idea of earning big bucks, or attaining some high-flying title.

The jobs these students want are frequently hot, dirty, and difficult. Sometimes downright depressing. More often than not, low-paying.

But this doesn’t faze them. These young men and women want a challenging career devoted to doing good in the world.

And it isn’t some passing, unsophisticated fancy. They know the altruistic path is right for them, because they’ve already spent time walking it. On co-op.

They’ve spent months looking after HIV-positive toddlers in Africa. Connecting with local kids who’ve been physically or sexually abused. Teaching life skills to ex-convicts living in homeless shelters.

More and more students, university officials report, are planning co-ops and careers centered on service to others.

This year, history major Matt Shutzer slept in a ramshackle schoolhouse in a remote village in India when he worked on co-op with a group called Gram Vikas (a Hindi phrase meaning “village development”). The nongovernmental organization educates children, improves sanitation and drinking water, and offers medical care in underserved Indian communities.

When Shutzer, a senior, first got to the drought-ravaged agricultural area he was sent to, he’d wake up and think about home. But his responsibilities during the day—assessing living conditions, writing grants to bring in development money, steering residents toward planting crops they could sell as well as eat—were, as he puts it, “super-fulfilling.”

“Eventually,” he says, “I didn’t want to be anywhere else but this village in the middle of nowhere.”

**Determined to make a difference**

Other students share stories of similar epiphanies, when they realized that service co-ops were the co-ops they wanted most.

At a senior center in Newton, Massachusetts, human-services major Jackie Bresnahan saw sadness on the face of a lonely elderly woman. After showing her how to use the center’s gym, day by day she saw the woman’s mood lift.

Spending time with elderly men and women was “very rewarding,” says Bresnahan. “It made a big difference in their lives.”

At the Italian Home for Children in Boston, another human-services major, Emily Aicher, worked with kids dealing with emotional problems caused by physical or sexual abuse, or severe neglect. They’d act out by breaking things. Or hitting and kicking others.

“It was hard,” Aicher says. “But I loved it.”

A majority of students who pursue service co-ops are from the College of Arts and Sciences, where they tend to major in sociology, anthropology, human services, psychology, or international affairs.

“The students I work with want to make the world a better place,” says Lisa Worsh, associate cooperative-education faculty coordinator in arts and sciences. “They want a job that lets them learn while they work and make a positive impact.”

Some of these students find co-op positions in third-world countries where poverty and disease seem endemic. Others find jobs in the United States, where the scale of suffering may be less broad but not necessarily less intense.

Their employers tend to be nonprofits or nongovernmental organizations. Even in the best of times, such groups struggle to make ends meet. Right now, times are really tough.
Seed money: Esther Chou, AS’08, has been to Africa nine times to help people in need. She’s gotten interested in microfinance. “I realized,” she says, “that being poor was really the root cause of all the problems I’d seen in my travels.”

As a result, says Worsh, more and more students are taking unpaid co-ops, if they can make that work financially.

“Our students are very bright, energetic, and motivated,” she says. “Some of them are so interested in helping a cause, they’re willing to be incredibly creative in finding a way to do what they want to do.”

Last January, Alice Granger, a human-services major, wanted a co-op at the Boston Area Rape Crisis Center.

But the center offered only unpaid positions, and Granger couldn’t make ends meet without some kind of salary. So she improvised: She worked two days a week at the center, then three days a week at a paid position at the Pine Street Inn, a local homeless shelter.

After Granger finished her matched pair of co-ops in June, she promptly arranged for a year of study and service in South Africa.

Now a junior, she’s taking classes at the University of Cape Town. Through a service-learning project, she’s also mentoring a teenage girl who, after serving time in prison, is transitioning to a life outside confinement.

“I’m learning more here than I’ve ever learned in a classroom,” says Granger. “It’s a totally eye-opening experience.”

Worsh says Granger is typical of many Northeastern men and women. “Students don’t want to see change just in the United States,” she explains. “They want to see it globally.”

Step by step, finding their niche

Sometimes, a series of experiences coalesce to convince students that helping others is their life’s work.

Esther Chou, AS’08, who earned a dual major in international affairs and economics, grew up in Walnut Creek, California, a well-to-do San Francisco Bay area suburb.

She was the president of her high-school class. She volunteered at a hospital. She ran food drives for the homeless. But it wasn’t until she read an article about AIDS in Africa that she understood how bleak some people’s lives could be. “I didn’t know AIDS affected people to that magnitude,” she says. “I was ignorant.”

Senior Lakesha Groover made her own big switch, too. In 2007, she was studying fashion merchandising at New York City’s Fashion Institute of Technology.

Then she transferred to Northeastern to become a sociology major.

Why? “I decided I could do much more with the talents that I have, and I really enjoy helping people,” Groover says. “I wanted to be more hands-on.”

Once at Northeastern, she transferred again—to a major in human services.

“Meeting with Lisa Worsh is what really changed my mind,” recalls Groover. “I knew
sociology wasn’t the right fit. She opened my eyes to human services—and that was that.”

In summer 2008, Groover began a six-month co-op at the Big Sister Association of Greater Boston, working in the areas of recruitment and community partnerships.

“I loved it,” says Groover. “I had expected to be in the office all day. But in the summer we did a lot of community events. And during the fall, I hardly saw the office. I was out in the community meeting college students and recruiting at corporations.”

She decided to become a Big Sister herself, serving as a mentor to a group of fifth- and sixth-grade girls alongside several other Big Sisters. They all talked about body image and the media. Peer pressure. Values.

Being a Big Sister, says Groover, was “awesome.” Although the younger girls started off very quiet and shy, “by the end we couldn’t get them to stop talking. They just came out of their shells.”

Even after her co-op was over, Groover kept working at Big Sister part-time.

Sociology major Jonathan Harrington, AS’09, says when he first started thinking about co-op, the only thing he knew was he didn’t want “to do the daily grind.”

“I wanted to be emotionally invested in the place where I worked, and be able to identify with its goals,” he says.

In July 2008, Harrington found a co-op at Youth for Understanding, a nonprofit in Cambridge, Massachusetts, that helps young people around the world experience another culture while living with a host family.

“It was pretty obvious that the people I worked with weren’t there for themselves,” says Harrington. “They were there because they wanted to help these students realize their dreams of going abroad.”

Across the river in Boston, fellow sociology major Chris Cook, AS’07, helped other young people do something that seemed equally exotic to many of them: go to college.

Cook grew up on Long Island, New York, where college is an easy next step for most high-school grads. But, after a close friend died young, Cook felt drawn to helping others in less-fortunate circumstances, to maximize the good he could do with his life.

He did a co-op at a Boston organization called Bottom Line, which helps kids get into college and stay there.

“I learned about the struggles a lot of Boston public-school kids face on a day-to-day basis,”
he says, “and the wide disparity of education they receive.” Boston Latin School students are well prepared for college, for instance. Some other public-school kids are not as lucky.

Cook’s co-op led to a career: He’s now a teacher and the athletic director at Boston Preparatory Charter Public School, one of the nation’s highest-performing charter schools.

**Flashes of intensity**
Co-op students working to make the world a better place occasionally find themselves in the middle of a powerful moment.

One day at the Pine Street Inn shelter, Alice Granger suddenly saw that she—a 5-foot 2-inch twenty-year-old college student—had gained the respect of older men hardened by years of imprisonment.

“There I was, talking to these middle-aged men straight out of prison, teaching them how to double-click a mouse,” she recalls. “I’d never done anything like that before. When I first started at Pine Street Inn, I didn’t think I could handle it. But I did.”

In Zambia, Esther Chou had an encounter that cemented her interest in microfinance. A certain woman, an Angolan refugee, would look for Chou every day in the marketplace and ask for money.

“I kept having to tell her no,” says Chou. “Finally, I told her, ‘I can’t give it to you because, if I did, you’d still be hungry tomorrow.’ She said, ‘Well, fine, then give me a job.’ I said, ‘I can’t hire you.’ Then she said, ‘Why don’t you give me money, and I’ll make my own job?’”

Hannah Webb, who’s majoring in human services and international affairs, spent six months working at the food pantry at Rosie’s Place, a homeless women’s shelter in Boston.

During that time, she also took an unpaid position at Project Have Hope, which encourages Ugandan refugee women to make jewelry for sale in the United States, and offers them vocational training, literacy classes, and schooling for their children. As part of that position, Webb spent ten days in Kampala, Uganda. When she arrived, she was hit hard by culture shock.

“The first night especially was overwhelming,” Webb says. “But the refugee women were incredible. They had been through the most atrocious things you can imagine, yet they were laughing and smiling and hugging us. We just felt so welcome right away. It was awesome.”

After seeing the work of Project Have Hope up close—and being part of the effort herself—Webb is sure she wants to do more on the international front.

“Especially in Uganda,” she says.
**Invaluable, unflagging energy**

Those who work at nonprofits, human-service agencies, senior centers, and international organizations are grateful for the help co-op students give them.

The students are, they report, almost uniformly energetic and idealistic, and offer welcome support when funds are scarce and need is great.

“We’ve had more than a dozen students over the last eight years, and I couldn’t do without them,” says Francine Godfrey, fitness and wellness director at Jewish Community Housing for the Elderly.


Today, Godfrey can no longer afford to hire co-op students because of budget cuts. “I’m struggling now, without that help,” she says.

Isabelle Cetoute, food pantry coordinator at Rosie’s Place, supervised Hannah Webb, who stocked the shelter’s pantry shelves, updated computer records, and escorted women using the pantry.

“Hannah was really great,” Cetoute says. “She was a go-getter. I never had to ask her to do anything twice.”

At the Big Sister Association of Greater Boston, Judy Neufeld, manager of recruitment and community partnerships, says she watched as Lakesha Groover became “one of the strongest recruiters” she’s ever had on staff.

“We have several different kinds of recruitment events, ranging from information tables at colleges and community festivals, to PowerPoint information sessions with corporate partners,” says Neufeld. “I typically don’t train co-op students to do the high-level corporate information sessions, because that work can be intimidating.

“But Lakesha was trained for them, and she covered a good number of them. I could count on her to be professional, prompt, and reliable.”

**“The perfect job for me”**

Do these idealistic, service-minded students ever question their path? Fantasize about a nine-to-five job that’s less challenging?

In addition to working with the elderly, Bresnahan, who’s now a senior, had a co-op at the Kennedy Day School, part of the Franciscan Hospital for Children, where she helped kids with a wide array of health and behavioral issues.

She agrees that counseling people as they work through tough problems can be “incredibly draining.”

Sometimes, Groover says, when she’s bogged down with papers and reading assignments, she misses the fashion world. “Our finals at the Fashion Institute of Technology consisted of in-class presentations, a lot of creative things,” she says.

Studying at a university that requires a lot of reading, writing, and analytical thinking “was a huge shift,” she explains. Yet she says she “definitely” made the right move. She’s currently planning for a career in social work or family law.

Emily Aicher often came home physically and emotionally drained after a long day of working with troubled kids.

“These kids have really bad trauma histories,” Aicher says. “Physical or sexual abuse, neglect, parents with substance-abuse issues.

“A lot of them have delayed development or post-traumatic stress disorder. It’s hard to hear about all they’ve been through, and even worse sometimes to see the results.” But, she adds, “I know I could never have an office job at a desk in a cubicle. The work at the Italian Home for Children was hard, but it was the perfect job for me.”

Living in a remote corner of India meant Matt Shutzer had to forgo creature comforts. The schoolhouse he called home? “The roof leaked,” Shutzer says. “We slept in puddles. We had to deal with dogs and mosquitoes.”

Even so, he quickly adds, “I can’t wait to get back.

“I want to be an advocate for people who are at the lowest rung of society.”

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