SAINT MICHAEL’S College is a sort of pioneer in encouraging students to do something for the poor instead of the beer companies during spring break. For 16 years, the college has been arranging for students to travel to various sites to serve the needy during the March vacation. This past spring, more than 100 Saint Michael’s students worked with homeless people in Hartford, Conn., and AIDS patients in New York City, replanted indigenous plants at the Grand Canyon and built a home in Minneapolis through Habitat for Humanity.

Such service initiatives are increasingly common. As part of an honors course called Grass-Roots Community Development, about 100 University of Massachusetts Amherst students performed emergency home repairs and other services for needy people in nearby Holyoke, Mass., and in rural Virginia.

This fall, the University of Vermont goes a step farther, providing AmeriCorps*VISTA volunteers with the opportunity to provide service to Vermont communities and earn up to nine undergraduate or graduate credits for structured reflection on their experience. The so-called VISTA scholars will attend UVM workshops, create portfolios and work with faculty advisors during residency weekends on campus.

The service programs create unexpected spinoffs. Several Saint Michael’s students who spent spring break working at a Florida camp serving migrant farm workers were invited by the camp operator to return as teachers in the summer. Three Fairfield University students who spent spring break conducting research in Nicaragua decided to return on their own in June to build houses for people whose homes were destroyed by Hurricane Mitch.

Service programs also teach unexpected lessons. One group of Saint Michael’s students who spent spring break working with AIDS patients in Haiti reported back to the Saint Michael’s board of trustees that it seemed unfair for them to do the work when jobs are so scarce for Haitian nationals.

Then there is the touchy question among academics of whether a week of grueling work in a Hartford soup kitchen is worthy of academic credit. At Saint Michael’s, which does not award credit for the programs, President Marc A. vanderHeyden says it’s more important that the service experience inform a student’s regular coursework: “I’d like to see a history major who spends the spring working with homeless people in Hartford go back to classes and write a paper on homelessness in ancient Venice—to connect the experience with what he’s into anyway,” says vanderHeyden.

Now, some of the region’s research-based programs are harnessing the creativity and practical good sense of service-oriented learning. The Cover Stories in this issue of CONNECTION recount, in particular, how two distinctly different New England institutions—the University of Rhode Island and Bates College—are encouraging students to apply their research in the public interest. It’s a case of student activism meets experiential learning meets resume-building. As Bates College President Donald Harward says of the college’s applied research in Lewiston and Auburn, Maine: “Bates is able to enhance hands-on learning while addressing community needs.”

Our Cover Stories also offer a look at the changing world of knowledge applied in the private interest—replete with issues of patents, licenses, incubators, venture capital and, yes, conflicts of interest.

Just as we went to press, two things happened that seemed to reaffirm the timeliness of this exploration. First, Harvard launched its new Research Matters website to show how its scientific research affects people’s lives. Then, the industry-sponsored Business Higher Education Forum issued a major study of university-industry collaborations that was quickly assailed for glossing over the ethical snare presented by corporatized academic research. These issues will bear watching, for in New England, knowledge matters, especially when it’s applied—and applied generously.

John O. Harney is executive editor of CONNECTION.