Students from St. Benedict’s/St. John’s spend an afternoon with participants at the Developmental Skills Lab.

As I rounded the corner to my office Monday morning, I glanced into the open door of Room 173. It was dark. Empty. For that split-second, I had expected it to be filled with light and laughter and the sounds of nine students getting ready for another day of service at the CPD.

And then I remembered—the Fellowship of the Spring had disbanded and returned to their homes in faraway Minnesota.

For the third year in a row, students from the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University in central Minnesota have come to Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities for an Alternative Break Experience (ABE). The CPD is one of several locations from which students can choose to offer their service during the break, rather than trading ice and snow for warmer, sunnier locales.

“These kids could have done anything else for their spring break,” said CPD volunteer coordinator Jeff Sheen, “but they chose to pile into a van and drive 23 hours to Logan, Utah to do service.

“We gave them a robust experience with a sample of activities,” Sheen said, including meeting and interacting with participants at PEER and DSL, two days of skiing and snowshoeing at Beaver Mountain with Common Ground Outdoor Adventures, bowling with Top Sports and leading a tour group of special ed students from Summit Elementary at the Nora Eccles Harrison Museum of Art. They attended a USU men’s basketball game, went on a short hike and met students from Aggie Advocates and the Interdisciplinary Disability Awareness and Service Learning class.

“I can’t say enough good things about this group,” Sheen said. “Their unity and cohesion, their enthusiasm and energy … in every situation, they just dove in feet first and didn’t hesitate. When they went bowling with Top Sports, they just went up and introduced themselves and started working with the kids. They just embraced each other and worked together.”

The students didn’t know each other before they boarded the bus in Minnesota.

“It’s a seminal experience in life, that one road trip we all remember,” Sheen said. “The beauty of it is that it wasn’t just one moment, it will affect everything they do going forward.”

The students arrived late in the afternoon Sunday, March 2 and stayed with CPD host families during the week. All of the students and their host families got together Thursday night for an impromptu pot-luck, complete with a rocking Dance Dance Party competition.

“We enjoyed the experience of having three of the students from Minnesota stay in our home. They were great girls!” said CPD administrative assistant LaDawn Neilson. “They all had different personalities and we were glad we were able to be their host family. We hope to stay in touch with them. I admire them for driving the whole way and spending their spring break doing volunteer service. I am sure they got as much or more out of the experience than those they helped.”

The students

Kirstin Maxam, senior pre-med from St. Paul, MN, said she has been exploring career options like mental health, occupational therapy or physical therapy, and, although
she had never been interested in an ABE, went to the information session.

“They talked about the CPD and it immediately struck a chord,” she said. “Not only do I get more experience working with people with disabilities, I get more information about what I might want to do with my life. It’s important work. It’s really rewarding work.”

Bowling with Top Sports was her favorite activity during the week.

“It was such an awesome hour,” she said. “We got to meet so many kids and their families. They are so supportive and loving. I never wanted it to end.”

Nathan Johnson, a nutrition major from Woodbury, MN, said he came on the trip to learn more about people with disabilities.

“It opened my eyes to how similar we are, how people with disabilities want to do the same things,” he said.

As a skier, his favorite activity was helping Common Ground participants at Beaver Mountain.

“It was cool to help people achieve their goal or dream, to see when they are able to do something they want to do,” he said.

Sarah Broos, an elementary education major from Mendota Heights, said she has always had a passion for people with disabilities.

“Working here seemed right up my alley,” she said. “I’m excited to learn about all kinds of disability, all the things at the CPD and people with disabilities and their caregivers. Common Ground is such a cool organization—I saw how much passion and joy the workers bring to their job every day.

“It felt like we were making relationships with the participants to take home with us.”

Lindsay Jenderko, a nursing major from Eden Prairie, MN, said she has a passion for people with disabilities, and the trip was a valuable experience to bring to her future nursing profession. The days with Common Ground were also her favorite activities.

“Developing relationships with the participants … the experience has been nothing short of incredible. Hopefully we can take that back and continue the legacy.”

Patti Indrelei, a nursing major from Mahtomedi, MN, said she wanted to learn more about how to care for people with disabilities and become an advocate as a nurse.

“Getting more experience, seeing how people with disabilities can do all the same things like ski and snowshoe—they can do anything if they put their heart to it. We made connections, and it was fun to work with them.”

Jordan Marshall, a business and math major from Hastings, MN, had a neighbor with disabilities and wanted to know more.

“I really love service and helping people,” she said. “I learned the broad ranges of what they can do, how to talk to them, how to treat them.”

Her favorite activities were the days with Common Ground, because she had never been skiing, and the afternoon at the Developmental Skills Lab.

“Everyone there is happy and treated independently unless they need help,” she said. “We could sit and actually talk with them. One couldn’t verbally speak with me but we had other ways of communicating.”

Marie Hudalla, a nutrition & pre-physical therapy major from Andover, MN, said she became interested in the trip to the CPD because last summer she job-shadowed a pediatric physical therapist.

“I want to work with a variety of ages, not just little kids,” she said. Her favorite activities were the experience with Common Ground and the museum tour.

“They had such a range of disabilities, but they could do all the activities,” she said.

Rachel Gott, an elementary education major from Stillwater, MN, said the trip had been a unique experience, and gave her a better understanding of working with people with disabilities.

“Individuals with disabilities have some unique abilities that people don’t always see,” she said. “This has been a powerful trip that drew me in.”

Steph Loeken, an elementary education major from Freeport, MN, hoped to gain insights into working with students with disabilities as a future classroom teacher.

“I don’t know if I can choose a favorite activity,” she said. “We worked so closely with individuals, really got to buddy up with individuals and learn from them.” Because of her
experience at the CPD, she is thinking about continuing her education with a master’s degree in special education.

The students participated in projects while at the CPD, but their spirit of service started long before, first with an improv comedy show and then by selling pizzas on Super Bowl Sunday. Rather than use the proceeds to reduce the cost of their trip, they donated their share—$188—to the CPD.

The Fellowship gathered at 7:30 a.m. on Saturday, March 8 to begin the long trek back to Minnesota. They loaded the bus with the belongings they had brought, plus a week’s worth of acquisitions—giant bags of Goldfish crackers, USU Game Day shirts and CPD goodies. There were hugs all around, promises to stay in touch were made, and more than a few tears were shed. They arrived safely home Sunday evening.

To see more photos from the week, visit our Facebook album here.