Kaylee Larson (center) helps fellow students build shelves at CReATE in Salt Lake City during the students’ spring break trip to the CPD

Kaylee Larson visited the CPD in March with a group of students from the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University in Minnesota. The schools’ Alternative Break Experience offers students a chance to complete service projects during Spring Break week. The college years are a time of change and growth for students, and it’s not unusual to begin a course of study in one major and graduate in another. Two students recently changed their focus after service-learning experiences at Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities.

Larson recently changed her major from nursing to psychology with an exercise science and sports minor, and plans to attend graduate school in special education with a goal of working for Special Olympics or a similar organization.

“The there’s not much about the trip to the CPD that didn’t influence me,” she said. “It was not the first experience I had with people with disabilities, but just seeing what the Center does and how many people you reach out to … it’s such a different perspective.”

Larson had worked full time with people with disabilities, providing in-home and group home care. She also had volunteered with Special Olympics.

“I just wanted to do more, I guess,” she said. “I want to work collaboratively with schools. My end goal is to get Special Olympics in high schools and middle schools so it’s a more available opportunity. I want to get it more immersed in the schools.”

When another spring break group travels to the CPD in March 2014, Larson hopes to be part of it. However, she’s also trying to work out the details of a possible internship with the CPD’s Up to 3 Program, which are normally reserved for USU students.

Cameron Cressall, a senior social work major at USU, participated in the CPD’s Interdisciplinary Disability Awareness and Service Learning (IDASL) class during the 2012-2013 school year.

“I have a brother who is deaf, and I thought I had a better understanding of disability and what life was like for people with disabilities,” he said. “I was wrong.”
The social work degree can create very broad opportunities Cressall said. He has worked as a supervisor in youth facilities in Logan and Ogden, and did his practicum in substance abuse at Bear River Health at the same time he was experiencing IDASL.

IDASL contains a service-learning component, in which students are required to serve volunteer hours at several sites, which include the CPD’s Assistive Technology Lab, the Developmental Skills Lab, Project PEER, the Child Care Nutrition Project, Up to 3 and TOP Sports, as well as community organization such as OPTIONS for Independence and Common Ground.

Cressall said interacting with the participants of the various sites made all the difference.

“"It was an eye-opener for me," he said. "I knew that disability was part of the social work field, but I never understood, not just how broad it was but how neglected that whole population is. There’s a huge part of the population that is largely neglected by the system and by the larger part of society.

“The more I invested in the IDASL experience, the more I felt myself changing," he said. “The class can be challenging, not just the time restraints, but it can be emotionally taxing as well.”

In the middle of his year-long IDASL course, Cressall began working part-time at the AT lab.

“I love the AT lab. I really, really enjoy what we do here in the lab and going out into the field," he said. “My excitement has grown. My interest in the field of AT has grown. I feel privileged to be able to have the opportunity to help people and hopefully make their lives better.”

Cressall said he is much more aware of disability after taking the class and working at the AT lab. Now, he said, he walks into a restaurant and immediately notices the sign that lists the accommodations available for people with disabilities.

“I never would have noticed that before," he said. “It’s right there in front of us every day, and I didn’t notice. I’m a better person because of that.”