In the spring of 1967, while I was a junior at Trinity College, I signed up for a course called—if I remember correctly—Contemporary Religious Thought. As part of that course, my professor assigned us to work on a variety of projects in North Hartford. My project was a survey of women who were receiving a form of welfare then called Aid to Dependent Children. As a tiny part of what would become the Welfare-to-Work program, I interviewed a dozen or so women who were receiving this aid.

Through this outside-the-classroom experience I learned more than I ever could have in a classroom about poverty, gender relationships, and powerlessness. One incident illustrates this perfectly. Having just knocked on the door of an interviewee’s apartment, I heard a lot of banging around inside, and then a window opened. Later during the interview, I learned from the interviewee that I had interrupted her boyfriend’s nap, and he had scurried down the fire escape because they both thought I was a government official who would bust them for living together.

Only a few classroom experiences have stayed so vividly in my mind for 44 years. As a result, I have always been an enthusiastic proponent of student engagement. I also know, because of my personal experience, that such engagement is the result of the dedication and commitment of a faculty or staff member. Here at the University of Hartford we are very fortunate to have a number of faculty and staff who create wonderful engagement experiences for our students. I want to outline just a few of them.

Karen Breda, associate professor of nursing, and her colleagues created Project Horizon, which brings our nurse-students to homeless shelters to provide health care. Since students in our program are already registered nurses, they are able to provide what is frequently the only form of health care available to the people who live in these shelters.

Margery Steinberg, associate professor of marketing, created the Micro Business Incubator as part of her commitment to the merchants of Upper Albany Avenue. In her course our students work hand-in-hand with small-business owners, providing help in accounting, marketing, inventory control, and web design. As a result, our students get firsthand experience of the joys and challenges of being a small-business owner.

Mary Christensen, assistant professor of education, leads Educational Main Street (EMS), a program created by my predecessor, Humphrey Tonkin, to provide tutoring and mentoring experiences for our students in the public schools of Hartford’s North End. Now 21 years old, EMS has helped thousands of school children in the Greater Hartford community and changed the lives of thousands of University students.

David Pines, associate professor of civil and environmental engineering, leads our student chapter of Engineers Without Borders, which engages our students (in engineering and other areas) in water projects in India and Kenya.

Natacha Poggio, assistant professor of visual communication design, leads students in a variety of projects that provide visual communication to important social causes, ranging from India to North Hartford.

Wick Griswold, associate professor of sociology, leads students on environmental projects involving water in the Hartford area, including yearly river cleanups on campus.

In addition, our Center for Community Service, led by Matt Blocker, provides dozens of opportunities for students to become engaged in projects throughout our community and our nation.

This only scratches the surface of the dozens of faculty and staff and the hundreds of University students engaged in our community and our world. Just thinking of all the people and projects I have had to skip in keeping this essay short, I realize that the University deservedly should be thought of as a leader in student engagement. I trust that our students’ outside-the-classroom experiences change their lives as much as my experience changed mine. For such invaluable educational experience, they have a committed campus community to thank, as do I.