Quick, answer this question: What business are we in at Robert Morris University?

I bet many of you said education. It’s a good guess. We are an institution of higher learning that prides itself on delivering high-quality, professionally focused degree programs. That’s our product, if you will. But as I’m fond of reminding our faculty and staff, RMU actually is in the business of changing lives.

Why is this distinction significant?

For one, organizations that stay focused on their core mission are more likely to survive periods of wrenching transformation—like that which our nation has endured over the past several years. History is littered with entire industries that collapsed because they confused their product with their mission. Railroad companies, it’s been said, failed because they thought they were in the railroad business, when they really were in the transportation business. Similarly, many newspapers struggle today because they believe they are in the newspaper business, when their true mission is journalism, which shouldn’t depend on any one platform.

More importantly, to say that RMU is simply in the business of providing students with a diploma sells short what actually goes on here. Make no mistake: RMU always will place a premium on academic excellence. The constant that runs through our eclectic history is our ability to provide students with a hands-on education that allows them to thrive in the workplace. But students don’t come to college simply to earn a degree, nor are strong academic credentials any longer a sufficient condition for professional success in a rapidly changing economy.

That’s why we also emphasize engaged learning, which, as you’ll remember from the last issue of the President’s Insider, we formalized with the Student Engagement Transcript. This allows students to document their community service. Their internships. Their honors research, campus leadership, athletics, student theater, and student news media—to name a few.

These experiences are made possible by our dedicated faculty and staff, who develop lasting relationships with the students they serve. In this issue, we take a look not only at the students whose lives were changed but also at the people who were the catalyst for that change.

When my staff and I were planning this edition of the President’s Insider, we thought about devoting separate stories about community service, professional experience, and academics. But engaged learning doesn’t always happen in such discrete categories. Students often apply what they learn in the classroom in organizing a community service project. And in turn, they may find the project so rewarding that it leads them to choose a career they never would have considered otherwise.

That’s what we mean when we say that we are in the business of changing lives.

Sincerely,

Gregory G. Dell’Omo, Ph.D.
As the owner of a small business in Wexford, Dave Brauer’s thoughts were often on his balance sheet. So when he realized Beecher’s Coffee needed a human resources administrator, he opted to go back to school and study HR himself rather than add an additional staffer. What he found at Robert Morris University was an environment that helped expand his vision from the bottom line to the big picture.

“I used to think you went to college to get good grades and find the fastest path to the biggest paycheck,” says Dave, who earned his master’s degree last year in human resource management. “But at Robert Morris, I had a mentor who was genuinely interested in helping me explore what I wanted to do if we pulled money out of the equation.”

To be sure, Dave had already started on a path that he describes as more holistic. A political science graduate of the University of Pittsburgh, he worked for a few years as a financial adviser, and spent a year or so at a Michigan law school.

While he enjoyed the education, he couldn’t see spending years working crazy hours just to land a law partnership. He missed his girlfriend back in Pittsburgh, and began to think about life in terms beyond just financial success.

Returning home, he opened Beecher’s Coffee as a retail coffee shop in 2002 with the help of family members. Within five years, he had enrolled in RMU’s School of Business.

It was his work with Darlene Motley, however, that really opened his eyes and changed his life. Darlene, the director of RMU’s master of science program in human resources management, took Dave on as a graduate assistant and guided his research into organizational sustainability.

“Sustainability from a human resource management perspective begins with hiring the right people and then more,” says Darlene. “It’s about being a source of feedback, and making sure all departments are tying into the organization’s strategy, including the economic, environmental and social pieces. Dave brought a lot of enthusiasm and entrepreneurial spirit to his work, challenging ideas and taking initiative.”

Dave retooled Beecher’s Coffee into a wholesale-only operation, buying directly from regional farmers who harvest shade-grown and organic coffee beans, and shipping them in compostable packaging. Clients include LaRoche College, the Children’s Museum of Pittsburgh and a number of churches. The company now donates 51 percent of its profits to such faith-based charities as Glade Run Foundation and Light of Life Rescue Mission.

Dave has also changed his long-term goals. He wants to teach sustainable business management in Pittsburgh, and in January begins a Ph.D. program at England’s Durham University. He’ll commute periodically for the first year, with his girlfriend-turned-wife and two children joining him in Durham for the second year.

“It’s not like I went to RMU and now I don’t care about money,” he says. “But business is no longer for me just the means to an end. I found a path for my life that’s more interesting.”
Carl Ross is all about changing lives—through his students, through his teaching and through his work as a nurse practitioner. Carl, a university professor of nursing, recently took his 74th trip to Nicaragua, where he has been traveling since 1995 to provide health care, nursing, education, clothing, and most importantly, hope to that nation’s underprivileged communities. Approximately 500 students have traveled with Carl to Nicaragua during his career, which includes a previous stint on the nursing faculty at Duquesne University.

Carl has had a tremendous impact on his students’ lives. But don’t take my word for it.

“Dr. Ross shaped me as a person by encouraging me to experience nursing firsthand in Nicaragua, which in turn changed my life forever. He also taught me that success isn’t measured by how much money you have or how powerful your career is; success is how many people you have touched and have been changed by you along the way,” says Emily Himmel, a 2010 graduate.

“The crazy thing about the people’s lives I’ve changed is that every life that I have touched, they touched mine as well,” says Emily.

Perhaps no one exemplifies better the impact that Carl has on his students than David Lee Folk, who also graduated last spring. Lee traveled twice to Nicaragua as a student, and his work there helped to earn him the university’s Rising Star Award and Presidential Transformational Award, the highest honors for an undergraduate. Lee traveled to Nicaragua over the summer with Carl to film a commercial for RMU about his experiences there, and he went back again on Carl’s most recent trip.

“Dr. Ross is always looking for ways to impart the experience he’s gained from all his years in the field, and that’s an amazing quality to have in an instructor,” says Lee, now a nurse on the step-down trauma unit at Ruby Memorial Hospital in West Virginia. “Dr. Ross has been quietly working with students in the developing world for years now, and he has been changing thousands of lives, one day at a time. When they (Nicaraguans) meet a man like Dr. Ross, they see that he brings hope and help, and their opinions change. Really, he is changing more lives than he knows. He’s changing an entire country.”

Carl was the recipient this year of the RMU Presidential Award for Distinguished Teaching, and he was also recognized by his peers as the recipient of the Pennsylvania State Nurse Educator Award. Many applicants to the RMU nursing program are now coming because of the Nicaragua trip.

Carl credits an early mentor with providing the mantra that still guides him: “Nursing is privileged intimacy.” The dean of the School of Nursing and Health Sciences, Lynda Davidson, agrees. “Nurses address all components of the patient through addressing physical, emotional, and psychosocial aspects,” she says. “Nurses make a difference every day. As a nurse educator and nurse practitioner, Dr. Ross has been the perfect example for nursing students at RMU.”
Everywhere you look at Robert Morris University, you’ll find students whose lives have been changed for the better thanks to professors and staff members who’ve gone out of their way to provide help and guidance. One of these individuals is Cassandra Oden, director of RMU’s Center for Student Success.

Cassandra, who has been with RMU since 1992, is one of the first employees to receive the university’s Distinguished Achievement Award. The award recognizes university employees who go above and beyond what is required of them in their job description, and who always put students first. Talk Magazine, which covers minority affairs in Pennsylvania, also honored Cassandra this fall in its 36th Annual Salute to Minority Achievers issue.

Cassandra is in charge of the daily operations of the university’s Center for Student Success, which pairs every undergraduate student with a counselor who directs the student through registration and provides guidance. Counselors also help the student select the appropriate courses, clarify career goals, and resolve conflicts. Many schools have similar programs; however, RMU’s program is unique because it is so comprehensive.

“We have everything housed in one location,” says Cassandra. “When a student matriculates, he or she has one counselor from the time of entrance until graduation. Students in our Early Success Program begin working with their counselor the week before the other first-year students arrive.

“We have an open door policy,” she says. “If a student needs to see one of us, the student can just stop in.”

Specifically, Cassandra oversees and coordinates 29 sections of a 1-credit First Year Experience Course, 15 sections of a new 1-credit Study Skills Course, disability services, the Early Success Program, the state Act 101 Program for disadvantaged students, tutoring, and counseling services for all undergraduate students. But those are just her official duties. Cassandra regularly goes out of her way to exceed the needs of the students—students like Ciera Wilson, a senior business management major at RMU.

“Cassandra is always willing to go the extra mile to help you out or to somehow assist you with something,” says Ciera. “She was booked all day and still found time to fit me into her schedule and help me plan my classes. Or this one day I wanted to leave early for Christmas break and she arranged an early ride home for me. Since she wasn’t available to take me home herself, she asked someone else for the favor. She will help you succeed.”

“It is wonderful when a student comes in to meet with me and leaves understanding something that he or she didn’t know when they first arrived. That’s when I know I’ve done my job,” says Cassandra.

Of course, Cassandra is quick to point out that she has a lot of support. “The center consists of wonderful team who make this all happen: Tracy Gorrell, Nicole Hammond, Loretta Jeter, Erin Manna, Andrea Schnarrs, Meredith Weber, and Randon Willard. They all play a part.”