

# Philanthropy fuels UNI community engagement

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Thanks to a Veridian Fellowship, Jennifer Onuigbo, community relations manager for the Gallagher Bluedorn, partnered with the UNI Theatre Department to give youth a peek behind the curtain through the Science and Engineering in Theater Technology camp. A total of 70 middle and high school students from nine Iowa counties got hands-on experiences in audio engineering, lighting design, scenic design and costuming, among other areas, with UNI students serving as camp counselors.

From her vantage point directing the Office of Community Engagement, Julianne Gassman sees firsthand the incredible impact University of Northern Iowa students are making in the world around them.

The UNI community has long demonstrated a spirit of service, with students logging more than 600,000 volunteer hours in a given year. But Gassman says **philanthropic dollars** [<https://engagement.uni.edu/funding-scholarships>] from the Veridian Credit Union, the R.J. McElroy Trust and others are a big part of that story, fueling dozens of projects and internships that make a difference while developing students' professional skills and reinforcing what they learn in the classroom.

"A student once commented after working in the community, 'It's the first time I've seen my place in the world,'" Gassman said. "Investments that support students experiencing the world create better prepared graduates for their careers and support organizations working to better our community, while encouraging engaged citizenship. It's a win-win-win for the students, future employers and our communities."

A small selection of the projects shows UNI's wide-ranging impact. Students have: helped incarcerated individuals better access educational opportunities, coordinated exhibitions at the Grout Museum and addressed food insecurity; they have uncovered the Cedar Valley's archaeological past, illuminated College Hill as part of a cutting edge visual arts festival and created virtual storybook character avatars to promote youth literacy in local schools.

## Nearly two decades of support

The **Veridian Credit Union Community Engagement Fellowship**, created in 2005, supports faculty "engaging with community partners to better the community in a manner that also enhances their teaching and scholarship."

The **Robert and Yvonne Koob Fund for Student Community Engagement**, created in 2006, is an endowment supporting students who are completing internships in positions of service in Iowa. The fund provides stipends for internships that would otherwise be unpaid.

The **McElroy Youth Leadership Fund** supports community engagement projects with a youth focus.

Thanks to the Robert and Yvonne Koob Fund for Student Community Engagement, McKenna Pierce, a political science major, is getting hands on with civic engagement.

Working with **Panthers Vote** [[https://l.instagram.com/?u=https%3A%2F%2Fpanthersvote.uni.edu%2F%3Ffbclid%3DPAZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAabM1xDCVxO4SvYAE8p8X3A9xla-kBhEoj8DOpkaygxcZ9m7BzBFQ-pwyM\\_aem\\_kqkfiUNuerX5izZZ4fAqGA&e=AT0curxqvNL0UFCxOu9GqpOIYwje-ZD2KJLr3qqQF2tjjOH2wP-qvLM9zcKYJzFPKJBs8wFnUJ\\_sz9yGgWkQHWK3e\\_8KLJPDZLG\\_f-LN5V5lxhhqdL5rPA](https://l.instagram.com/?u=https%3A%2F%2Fpanthersvote.uni.edu%2F%3Ffbclid%3DPAZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAabM1xDCVxO4SvYAE8p8X3A9xla-kBhEoj8DOpkaygxcZ9m7BzBFQ-pwyM_aem_kqkfiUNuerX5izZZ4fAqGA&e=AT0curxqvNL0UFCxOu9GqpOIYwje-ZD2KJLr3qqQF2tjjOH2wP-qvLM9zcKYJzFPKJBs8wFnUJ_sz9yGgWkQHWK3e_8KLJPDZLG_f-LN5V5lxhhqdL5rPA)]

– a non-partisan, award-winning initiative that helped turn out more than 70% of UNI students in the 2020 elections – Pierce is visiting classrooms, tabling at events and leading a social media campaign to ensure students cast their ballot this November.

Pierce said she is gaining valuable skills while helping her peers understand the importance of being a part of the democratic process.

“I am learning creative ways to reach people, including hosting events that will draw people in, incentivizing voters, and how to spread information throughout the campus,” Pierce said. “I would like to thank the donors ... it’s very helpful to receive the Koob stipend.”

Kristina Kofoot, assistant director for the Office of Community Engagement, said the Koob fund provides a stipend for an unpaid internship which enables students to “participate in a robust, meaningful experience they may not otherwise have been able to take on due to lack of funding.”

“Because these students are able to serve at their desired locations with less worry about financial restraints, the students are able to have better experiences and the organizations are able to benefit from student participation,” Kofoot said.

- / 82 Veridian Community Engagement Fellowships since 2005
- / 143 Koob student internships since 2006
- / 9 McElroy community engagement projects supported since 2023



The UNI Student Health Center partnered with Waterloo’s UNITE Summer Academy to offer a basketball league for K-4th grade students. A total of 85 youth participated and the project was supported by the McElroy Trust.