As we all know, community service is a two-way street. What our student-athletes get back for their volunteer efforts often outweighs what is given in service to the community.

Whether our student-athletes are reading books to inner-city school children, raising awareness for breast cancer and autism or distributing food to the disadvantaged during the holidays, their smiles and enthusiasm reaffirm how much joy and mutual benefit there is in giving.

On a recent trip to New York City to play Cornell University at Madison Square Garden, our men’s hockey team experienced this joy when we visited an organization called Ice Hockey in Harlem, a nonprofit organization that works to improve the social and academic well-being of Harlem children through ice hockey.

The clinic took place in New York’s Central Park on the morning of Boston University’s game against Cornell, with more than 30 Pee Wee players from Harlem participating. Skipping their morning skate and traveling from a hotel near Madison Square Garden to Central Park was a big departure from the team’s usual gameday ritual but the team unanimously voted to volunteer when approached with the opportunity months before.

It was a nice gesture to volunteer for the clinic, but how many of the players realized at the time what they would get back in return. On an outdoor rink on a perfect November day, the team skated with children whose social and economic challenges dwarfed any obstacles our team would face all season. But their enthusiasm that day just to play hockey was overwhelming as they jumped over the boards before the Zamboni could even finish the ice. When the clinic was underway, the smiles of the Harlem children were matched only by the smiles of the BU Terriers. The practice quickly broke down into small games of “shinny,” one-on-one goalie clinics, stick-handling drills and whatever other games were created on the spot between these new friends. It was a group of young people from two different worlds experiencing the pure joy of playing a game they loved and it was magnificent.

When the practice ended and it was time for the Terriers to return to their real lives, the yells of “goodbye” and “thank you” echoed across the park and were returned with waves and slow walks to the waiting bus. The fact that BU won a big game that night is irrelevant to the story, but the idea that the team may have gotten an assist from the children they volunteered to help is not.

Recently, I had an opportunity to experience the rewards of getting out into the community when I visited a local middle school and saw first-hand some of the challenges that inner city Boston Public Schools face. My visit to the Lilla G. Frederick Middle School in Boston’s Dorchester neighborhood was part of the “Principal Partners” program. Each year, community leaders in Boston are invited to be “principals for a day” in an effort to generate support for schools throughout the city.

During my tour, I met Principal James Brewer, who stood at the front door at the start of school and warmly greeted each child by name. Similar to the children we met in Harlem, students at the Frederick School face enormous challenges. Their school is located in the middle of one of the city’s most violent areas and 42 percent of the school’s students are “limited English proficient,” which often means that English is spoken as a second language at home. More than 15 percent of students struggled with moderate-to-severe disabilities. But once again the children’s enthusiasm in the face of so many obstacles was what stayed with me throughout the day.

After touring the facilities and speaking to classrooms about BU, we sat down with Principal Brewer and his staff to talk about how Boston University athletics could help the Frederick School achieve its goals. First on all our minds was getting these young students to start thinking about college.

One of the nonprofit programs closest to my heart is College for Every Student (CFES). CFES is a national non-profit organization dedicated to helping underserved students prepare for and gain access to college. For an ongoing partnership with the Frederick School, we suggested regular visits to Boston University, tours of the campus and Q&As with professors and student-athletes, similar to the work we do with schools through CFES. Just seeing a campus and realizing college is a possibility can make a big difference in children’s lives.

So setting up school visits to Boston University for middle school students and offering an active partnership is what I gave in community service that day. But what did I get back in return?

Like our men’s hockey team and all our student-athletes who do such great community work, I got back so much more. My time in our community always brings to focus the everyday struggles our students to start thinking about college.

Community service is always a two-way street. What we get back often outweighs what we give. Let’s all continue to work hard on our mission while continuing to be inspired by those we volunteer to help.

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