The best way to pay back is to pay forward

No one in the education business can afford to subscribe fully to Robert Fulghum's thesis that everything we need to know we learn in kindergarten—but we do learn an awful lot. We learn about paying back, for instance—a very handy little lesson to know. If you borrow drawing paper or a sky-blue crayon from your neighbor or lunch money from your teacher or a dollar from your little brother, you are expected to pay it back. Then, when you grow up, maybe you will feel obliged to pay back the credit card company, the mortgage company, the bank—or even, heaven forbid, your mom and dad.

Yet some of the debts we acquire in life have nothing to do with borrowing. We all receive free-will offerings from those who wish us well—parents; teachers; employers; family friends; personal, educational or professional mentors. They give us their time and devotion, guidance and counsel, wisdom and expertise, a job opportunity or a chance for advancement. These debts cannot be paid back—but they can be paid forward.

The university is uniquely positioned for paying forward. On the campus mentoring is a way of life at the time of life when it means the most. Rare are the students who leave the institution entirely debt-free, having achieved their goals solely by their own efforts. That they should choose their alma mater as a vehicle to balance the ledger is hardly surprising.

Sooner Magazine writers interview dozens of persons each year—faculty, students, alumni, visiting notables. If a single common thread runs through almost all of those encounters, it is an expression of gratitude toward an individual, a group or an institution that impacted their lives.

University of Oklahoma Foundation files are full of scholarship, award and loan funds established by alumni who remember the time when even a small amount of money was the margin between staying in school and dropping out. Memorial funds with a myriad of purposes are established every day to pay forward for the influence of persons who will never know that their assistance made a difference.

A successful Texas oilman confesses that he was a very average geology student at OU and often questioned whether he should drop out. He went to University College Dean Glenn Couch—not once but a number of times—for the encouragement that kept him in school and perhaps fostered the perseverance required in his chosen profession. Many years later, long after Dean Couch was gone, this alumnus paid his debt forward with contributions to energy education that have touched countless OU students.

By no means is the pay forward always monetary. One young man who later made university administration his career and student welfare his cause arrived at OU with the W.W. II veterans. With housing at a premium, he had nowhere to live until he was taken in by the eminent historian E. E. Dale and his wife, Rosalie, a kindness paid forward many times.

A fully endowed faculty chair in professional responsibility owes its existence to the impression made by criminal law professor Floyd Asher Wright on an extra-curricular group of law students in the 1930s. The chair’s donor, now an attorney in California, never forgot Wright’s declaration that the public university makes possible an education that many could not afford otherwise. Such a public benefaction, Wright contended, carries with it the reciprocal responsibility of graduates to work for the public good—or in his own case “owing eight hours a day to his employer, eight hours for rest and recuperation and eight hours to society to labor for the betterment of humanity.”

The well-being of the University owes a great deal to the spirit of reciprocity. Recently an OU development officer was asked what would happen to private support if a pure flat tax were enacted. He responded, “Well, that’s when we discover who the real philanthropists are.” Certainly tax deductions and estate planning play an important role in benevolent giving, but I have to believe that mostly we are still trying to say thank you for the sky-blue crayon we needed to complete the picture.

—CJB