

Miamian Feature Story



Brett Smith '91, director of Miami University's Center for Social Entrepreneurship, represents the facultywide whatever-it-takes approach that has earned Miami the No. 2 spot nationally for commitment to teaching and undergraduate education from U.S. News & World Report.

Miami the No. 2 spot for commitment to teaching and undergraduate education from *U.S. News & World Report*. Miami is tied with Princeton, just behind Dartmouth. (See "[Surveys say](#)" for details about this and Miami's other latest top rankings.)

"That ranking epitomizes what's unique about the Miami experience," says Smith, who taught as a visiting instructor 2001-2003 before joining the faculty full time in 2006. "Professors really get to know and care about their students and stretch them to be the best they can be.

"They pay us to do something we love to do, and it shows. You can see it all over the campus."

As an assistant professor of entrepreneurship, Smith challenges his own charges. He stretched them – and himself – even further as he developed the Center for Social Entrepreneurship. "We decided to leverage the Miami focus on undergrads and the power of the business school to create awareness and get students hands-on experience."

Launched in 2007, the center has as its mission "to create innovative solutions to persistent social problems, such as hunger and poverty," he says. "We have domestic problems, but the relative need seems to be greater in other parts of the world: People are living on \$1 a day. So we have an international viewpoint."

One of the center's most successful programs is Edun Live on Campus.

As he was wrapping up his PhD at the University of Cincinnati, Smith, his wife, Laura Wheeler Smith '91, and their children returned to Oxford in 2006. While teaching his first classes, Smith began negotiating with U2 lead singer and global activist Bono and his wife, Ali Hewson, to bring their line of socially conscious clothing, Edun Live, to Miami.

"In six weeks, 16 students took the idea and turned it into reality. Students from all over campus came together and built a business from the ground up," Smith says. "Edun Live on Campus (ELOC) is the flagship program for the Center for Social Entrepreneurship."

by Betsa Marsh

Any entrepreneur worth his ingenuity will tell you that much of the best thinking happens after he closes the office door and flips off the lights. Flashes of brilliance don't work 9 to 5.

So it's no surprise that Miami University's Center for Social Entrepreneurship keeps irregular hours. Students and founding director Brett Smith '91 remain open to the muses of social value and economic uplift round the clock.

"What happens in the classroom is nice, but it's what happens outside that is as important if not more so," Smith says. "That was true when I was a marketing major at Miami and it's true now.

"My professors, like Tom Speh '66 MBA '68, Dave Rosenthal, and Jan Taylor, would help you with your résumé or help you with a personal problem. Their doors were always open, and their office hours were always a million hours long. If it took meeting for a cup of coffee Uptown, fine."

It's that whatever-it-takes approach to undergraduate education that has earned



Like the Miami professors who taught him, Brett Smith '91 will meet with students any time almost anywhere to help them succeed.

ELOC's cotton T-shirts are sourced in sub-Saharan Africa from "grower to sewer." Workers, mostly in Uganda, Tanzania, and Lesotho, grow the cotton, then sew and ship the blank T's to Miami, where ELOC contracts with student groups to imprint their designs. A finished T is generally \$10.

About 30 students work on design and marketing through the ELOC website, YouTube channel, and guerrilla campaigns – they recently plastered campus with ELOC gear. For every 33 T-shirts sold, one worker gets a full day of fair, safe work. "We've sold more than 25,000 shirts," Smith tallies, "so that's more than 750 days of wages."

The ELOC launch respected no schedules. "We had students from all over campus," Smith recalls. "It took hundreds of meetings and thousands of e-mails."

Only three months after their first T-shirt delivery, ELOC leaders were presenting a rollout campaign to Edun Live's executive committee, including Hewson.

"This is the epitome of experiential learning," Smith says. "We coached them on their presentations and PowerPoints. It culminated in a presentation in a boardroom setting to the executives of an international company."

Since then, Miami ELOC has helped 20 other schools launch Edun Live, from William & Mary in Virginia to Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash. "All profits help fund the center and advance our mission."

For Smith, whose Jesuit high school in Cincinnati proclaimed its students "Men for Others," social entrepreneurship "combines those two passions, helping others and using the business component for social good."

It's a chord that resonates with many of Smith's students. Christine Mawby '04, a marketing major, nominated Smith for the Alumni Association's Effective Educator Award.

With Smith's encouragement, Mawby earned an MBA at Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. In her nominating letter, she wrote about spearheading social change at Miami as well as Wharton as a student leader.

"Brett has been there every step of the way ... always encouraging me to keep going – even when it is difficult or when I am feeling discouraged. His encouragement, wisdom, and strong belief in me have given me the confidence and the fortitude to take risks, to stand up for what I believe in, and to keep pushing myself to do more."

Another former student of Smith's, Jessica Reading '09, has taken up social entrepreneurship as her life's calling.

"I've always seen myself as a service person," she says from her home in San Diego. Choosing Miami because it had an undergraduate emphasis, she worked with the Hispanic business community in Hamilton, Ohio.

"Brett helped me create a nonprofit to empower each of those individuals to have a voice."



Miami students participated in "One Day Without Shoes" last April, joining 250,000 people around the world who shed their shoes to better understand the struggles of individuals who go barefoot every day. The event was sponsored by TOMS Shoes, whose founder, Blake Mycoskie, came to campus in February, at the Center for Social Entrepreneurship's invitation, to discuss social consciousness in business. He has built TOMS on the promise that, for every pair of shoes sold, the company will give a pair of new shoes to a child in need.

IMPROVING LIVES

Miami's Center for Social Entrepreneurship will help to improve the lives of rural villagers in developing nations, thanks to a new partnership with Greg Van Kirk '91, co-founder and executive director of Community Enterprise Solutions.

Reading found her relationship with Smith "much more mutual and less hierarchical," she says. "There was a sense of mutuality that developed, a sense of community, which let me think of a career in this field."

With Smith's help, Reading spent a year as an AmeriCorps*VISTA at Miami University Hamilton. Now, she's heading to Guatemala as a field consultant for Community Enterprise Solutions.

"Brett keeps the pulse of what's going on and takes risks – good risks," she says. "He speaks with patience and passion, and he has a lot of true, true heart. It's very important to see our mentors be risk takers and walk with conviction."

"I think we need to reduce the distance between ourselves and the students," Smith says, "to show that we're all sort of learners on the same journey together."

Smith and his family, who live a mile and a half from campus, occasionally hire students to baby-sit and invite them to church.

"I encourage students to move beyond the classroom. I ask them to write their mission statement as a person, so I can know the student at a deeper level."

Smith, like his own Miami professors, helps students refine résumés, identify internship opportunities, and connect with alumni in their fields.

This summer, he and Katie Mulligan '09, assistant director of the center, spread the message even further. Their grant proposal yielded \$480,000 from the U.S. State Department to lead an Institute on Social Entrepreneurship for 20 future leaders of North Africa.

"We had five weeks here on campus, then a 10-day tour on a bus to New York, Gettysburg, Pittsburgh, Annapolis, and Washington, D.C.," Smith says. "We had faculty, staff, and recent grads working together 24/7. It's a good example of the closeness we have with our students."

During the summer, the African visitors joined Brett and Laura and their children, Maddie, 12, Maxwell, 9, Mallory, 6, and Maguire, 4, at an ice cream social and a cultural fair. "Our children had tears in their eyes when they left."

Already, half of the summer attendees have plans for social entrepreneurship in their communities.

In another new project, Miami students are working with John Wood, author of *Leaving Microsoft to Change the World*, who came to campus in October to talk about Room to Read, an organization he has founded to build libraries and schools in the developing world. Wanting to represent the first undergraduate university to participate, the students are raising \$35,000 to build a school in Nepal.

"Let's face it," Smith says, "we have great, great students who come here, and it's a pleasure to work with them. We encourage them to become the best people they can be, and when they grow and develop, they can do incredible things."

To learn more about the Center for Social Entrepreneurship in the Farmer School of Business, go to www.fsb.muohio.edu/centers/social-entrepreneurship.

A freelance writer in Cincinnati, Betsa Marsh wrote about "An Unbreakable Spirit" in the Summer 2010 Miamian.

In this partnership, announced at the Clinton Global Initiative in New York earlier this fall, Miami students will work with Van Kirk to develop an international database that analyzes various communities' needs and identifies solutions through the MicroConsignment Model.

This initiative gives women in isolated, poor communities the chance to sell affordable goods, such as stoves, eyeglasses, seeds, solar-powered lights, and water purification buckets, to their neighbors through consignment. So far, 250 micro-entrepreneurs have sold more than 58,000 products in 2,400 villages.

Center director Brett Smith '91, who sees exciting potential for involving major, multi-national corporations in this venture, says, "We are thrilled to work with such a passionate and world-renowned social entrepreneur. Greg has brought on-the-ground expertise to our program."

Van Kirk, recently featured on CNN's "Conscious Capitalism," received the prestigious Ashoka Globalizer Award, which he is using to expand his MicroConsignment Model into several continents.



Greg Van Kirk '91, co-founder and executive director of Community Enterprise Solutions, talks with a Guatemalan woman who, through Van Kirk's organization, is selling affordable necessities, such as glasses, on consignment to her neighbors.