

Front row, left to right: Mason Michalski '25, Kirsten Buckner '25, Edmira Jaco-English '24, Winnie Do '24. Back row, left to right: Gretchen Stock '24, Tom Park '26, Katie Iverson '26, Emma Fournier '25, Sunny Mehta Morgado '24, Kirby Pieri '24. (Sainath Kallur '24/University of St. Thomas)



STORY

Business & Law

Students Find Purpose in Lives of Service

MAY 07, 2024 • By [Emma Brobakke '26](#)

Advancing the common good is the beating heart of the University of St. Thomas. In an increasingly complicated and polarized world, some students are finding their grounding by giving back.

The pioneering [Damus Board program](#) in the Opus College of Business is preparing students at Minnesota's largest private university to answer questions such as: Which social issues are the most pressing in our communities? How are nonprofits meeting those needs? How do my personal values align with this work? They gain those answers while learning about the impact of philanthropy.

Students are selected to be a part of the Damus Board, where they collaborate to award funds to nonprofit organizations. The Damus Board has awarded over \$25,000 per year to Minnesota nonprofits. The philanthropic project is fully funded by individual donors and aims to inspire future business leaders to contribute to the common good.

Racial inequity in the Twin Cities has been a key challenge the Damus Board has worked to address. In recent years, the board has decided to fund organizations that work to advance economic justice, close the education gap, and support housing equity.



Board member Tom Park '26 with Ujamaa Place awardees, Titas Forseen and Executive Director Chris Crutchfield. (Sainath Kallur '24/University of St. Thomas)

“The most important way to see what needs to be changed is by discovering how the lives of people today in my own community are being affected and learning how I can help,” said Damus Board alumna Sophie Zwak, on the board’s emphasis on racial justice.

After a busy winter and spring evaluating nonprofit applications, the time had finally come for the 2023-24 Damus Board to award their grants.

This year’s award of \$30,000 was split among three organizations providing an invaluable impact on the Twin Cities community in the area of mental health equity.

[Mi C.A.S.A](#) serves at-risk and low-income Latinos and other historically underrepresented communities, centering racial equity and prioritizing mental health.

[Ujamaa Place](#) provides holistic opportunities for young Black men experiencing inequity at the intersection of race and poverty, helping them achieve brotherhood, stability, and personal success.

[Restoration for All](#) supports mental health for people of African ancestry, providing culturally and linguistically appropriate mental health services to marginalized and underrepresented communities facing multiple barriers to care.

In a celebratory space in the Iversen Center for Faith on April 25, a proud and humble atmosphere filled the air as the recipients accepted the awards.

Visibly touched, attendees listened to Dr. Tolulope Monisola Ola, CEO and founder of Restoration for All, describe the organization’s approach to encountering young people struggling with mental health.

“Instead of asking, what’s wrong with you? We ask: what happened to you?” Ola said.

In addition to the real-life community impact, the Damus Board provides students with professional development. Learning consensus decision-making strategies, students work together to create an application and evaluation criteria for the organizations. The award selection process also involves visits and interviews with finalists.



Sainath Kallur '24/University of St. Thomas

“We were inspired and energized working with the students of the Damus Board, who approached this process with thoughtful questions, curiosity, and a clear vision of how they wanted to make a difference in our communities. We work with many funders and grant-making organizations and were blown away by the Damus Board students’ professionalism, organization, and passion,” said Rae Wood, of The Family Partnership, a previous recipient of the Damus award.

Serious in their understanding of pressing issues, students also retained a hopeful attitude, having encountered the forces for change in the community.

“This year has had my favorite experiences at St. Thomas as I focus on philanthropy, and work for the common good. I feel like this experience really showed me what I want to do in a future career,” said Kirsten Buckner, a 2023-24 Damus Board member.

The challenging decisions faced by the board are made easier by the trust and friendships fostered between fellow board members.

D-I soccer player Emma Fournier '25 has had an impactful experience on the Damus Board. “Going out of my comfort zone joining a group like this provided me with so many opportunities to grow myself as a leader, student, teammate, and as a friend,” Fournier said.



Board member Emma Fournier '25 shares about her Damus Board experience. (Sainath Kallur '24/University of St. Thomas)

“The Damus Board is a perfect example of the university’s mission for the common good in action. During the program, students have an opportunity to explore and commit to their own personal purpose,” said Julie Reiter, the board’s adviser.

“They’re inspired to lead a life of meaning, as they gain a deeper understanding of the impact they can have on those around them and within our communities.”

Since 2009, 152 students have experienced the personal and professional development provided by the Damus Board program. Providing over \$475,000 in funding for local changemaking, the program has had an impact far greater than the grants alone. Damus Board alumni contribute to a generation of thoughtful leadership and ethical inquiry in corporate and philanthropic endeavors.

At the awards dinner, Damus Board alumnus and successful entrepreneur [Sean Higgins](#) '12, '14 MBA gave the keynote speech, highlighting how his experiences at St. Thomas have inspired him to make a difference in the development of his own business.

Current board members also shared lessons from the past year before handing out the Damus Awards. Fournier emphasized her own personal development and growth: Experiencing the selflessness demonstrated by local forces for good has brought forth new perspectives. “I feel like now I show up in spaces differently than how I did before Damus,” she said.

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