When they were in high school not long ago, three University of the Pacific students believed the purpose of higher education was just to prepare for a career. Now nearing graduation, they realize college is so much more. It’s about self-discovery, finding the right job and making a difference in the community.

These are students whose college experience has been shaped by the foundering of the U.S. economy; by hurricane Katrina’s devastation in Louisiana; and the culpability of BP in the current Gulf Coast oil disaster.

“The point of college is to increase your knowledge and awareness of life and people,” says business major Elisa Asato ’11. “I’ve matured to the point that I see my actions affect more than me.”

The catalyst for this conversion is Pacific Seminars (PacSem), the cornerstone of a robust general education program with roots trailing back to Pacific’s cluster colleges of the 1960s. PacSem focuses on setting a framework for students around the question “What is a Good Society?”

The university introduced the Mentor Program in 1992, which combined curricula geared to foster intellectual curiosity with community service. An extensive program review in 2003–04 resulted in the launch of the three Pacific Seminars in 2006. Since then, PacSem has drawn praise from across the country. Pacific was one of 11 universities selected to produce a video on best educational practices featuring Pacific Seminars for the 2008 annual Association of American Colleges and Universities meeting in Washington, D.C. The video can be viewed at go.Pacific.edu/PACS. Pacific was also one of six institutions chosen to write a chapter on best practices in general education showcasing Pacific Seminars for “New Directions for Teaching and Learning” (Wiley, 2010). The 2010–11 reader for PacSem III includes introductory comments from The Carnegie Foundation’s Dr. Anne Colby, a leading researcher on moral development.

All enrolled freshmen participate in PacSem I and II. They examine their assumptions and beliefs about a good society and begin to develop their critical reading, writing, research and discussion skills. The PacSem I textbook features writings by exemplary thinkers from across all ages and cultures. Seniors complete PacSem III, focusing on morality in society and in their own lives. The intellectual and ethical autobiography they write gives them a moral road map for their lives after Pacific.

“The courses don’t just break down a student’s belief system;
there’s also confirmation and support for beliefs,” says Lou Matz, an associate dean in College of the Pacific and director of General Education. “The goal is to create discomfort, help them to reevaluate what they believe, who they are, what they think is important. We want them to be comfortable with complexity.”

“The courses help shape your values, regardless of your major, and help you decide what you want to be as a person,” says Jhoanna Amigable ’11, a pre-pharmacy student contemplating a switch to medicine.

Amigable knows what it means to test her values. She was involved in an action against a campus fraternity during the previous school year. The case involved accusations of racism and counter allegations of retaliation.

“I wrote about this event in my PacSem III autobiography,” Amigable says. “It helped me reflect on my actions and will help shape my future. I question how I can go about doing the right thing without hurting others.”

“Preparing students for responsible leadership is part of Pacific’s mission statement,” explains Brian Klunk, associate professor of political science. He has taught all three PacSem courses and appreciates their cross-disciplinary nature. Pacific Seminars are taught by faculty from all the professional schools on the Stockton campus and every department in the College of the Pacific.

“In political science classes, we don’t see many students other than political science and international studies majors. In PacSem, we get a variety,” Klunk says. “Conservatory or engineering students naturally bring different perspectives, concerns and approaches to life. That is refreshing.”

The advantage works both ways. Elisa Asato, who also serves the campus community as the Commissioner of Arts and Entertainment for ASUOP, appreciates the thought-provoking discussions and classroom debates around ethical issues.

“PacSem III made me appreciate that I am learning something other than business, finance and accounting, which are part of my major,” Asato says.

“Faculty involved in PacSem have the opportunity to act as mentors to students, helping shape their vision of themselves and the world,” says Maria Garcia-Sheets, director of the Mathematics, Engineering, Science Achievement (MESA) Program, who teaches PacSem I and II. “Students arrive on campus filled with opinions about the world; they leave us ready to enter society as citizen-scholars: questioning, reflective and eager to take leadership roles.”

Patrick Dean ’11, a business major specializing in marketing and entrepreneurship, exemplifies the PacSem product. He’s familiar with the shifting values landscape. Dean began his academic path in engineering, and now plans to open an organic restaurant with locally grown products, a “meat and crème brûlée place… a man cave but with good food.”

The attraction of engineering as a financially lucrative career was supplanted by the recognition that he wanted to combine his love for cooking with his new understanding of clean food and clean energy, and work with family members and friends who already farm and ranch in the Central Valley.

Where he once thought the right job was just about financial security, now Dean recognizes the vagaries of the marketplace and is more focused on the role of ethics and individual responsibility in shaping our world.

“I can change… and I can change the people around me,” Dean says. “Now I realize I do have influence.”

Paula Sheil ’75 taught PacSem I in 2005–06. She teaches English composition and Shakespeare at San Joaquin Delta College.