

## A couple of roads scholars

### COOL travels to help college kids help others

By CORNELIA GRUMMAN  
Staff Writer

**W**hen a janitor mistook the dirty laundry outside a dormitory room for trash one day in 1980, Wayne Meisel decided to hold a clothes party. Each of the Harvard University student's friends was invited to donate an article or two for a worthy cause: Meisel.

The benefit would be one of his first experiences of soliciting help from others. Now, Meisel and Bobby Hackett are itinerant salesmen who have spent the last few years selling college students on the lofty concepts of "building a community" and the "spirit of volunteerism." Ideas foreign on most campuses, one would think, but this pair is bent on disproving popular opinion.

Their Washington-based group calls itself COOL — Campus Outreach Opportunity League. And since its inception two years ago, Meisel and Hackett, along with five full-time staffers, have developed a network of 322 campuses and helped establish, from scratch, close to 50 community service programs.

COOL serves as an adviser to existing student service programs at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, N.C. State University and Duke University, where COOL has its Southern office.

Under these programs, students help repair homes of the elderly, tutor minorities, serve as teaching assistants to disabled children and dish up food in a soup kitchen, among other things.

COOL's founders have won support from Harvard's Robert M. Coles, long acknowledged as a leading proponent of man's obligation to his fellow man. "Whatever America at its best is all about," says Coles, "for my money, these two represent that."

In a small conference room at Duke recently, Meisel, 28, and Hackett, 26, sit at one end of the table, quietly presiding over a meeting of 14 young people. Group members wear shorts and T-shirts and munch on barbecued potato chips as they quibble over the wording in their so-called "Durham Statement."

They are planning a student movement. At its core is this manifesto promoting the involvement of college students in community service.

They will be up until 2 a.m. poring over last-minute details. COOL's four-day "Summit" will begin later the same day, when nearly 60 campus leaders and administrators from around the country arrive at Duke to learn how to draw their students and the community together.

As COOL's conference organizer, Julia K. Scatliff reads through the agenda and distributes rat patrol duties.

"OK, guys, Wib Gulley, the mayor of Durham and a former Duke student, will be coming to speak to us on Monday at 2 p.m.," says Ms. Scatliff, 24, a Chapel Hill native and 1985 graduate of Carleton College in Northfield, Minn. "Who knows anything about the mayor?"

Silence.

"Well, I had to introduce him once," Hampton Newsome, a Duke senior, mutters grudgingly. "I guess I'll do it."

Rousing cheers.

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Staff photo by Robert Willett

Duke University is Southern base for Wayne Meisel's and Bobby Hackett's nationwide service program

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"People have stereotyped today's students as apathetic," Meisel says later. "That's not true. All over the place, students are doing things and want to get involved, but they lack organization and leadership."

COOL sets out to provide that.

"The people in COOL are onto the fact that there's a change about to happen, and they're trying to do something about it, trying to give it a little direction," Duke Leadership Program Director Bruce L. Payne says in his welcoming speech to Summit participants.

"It took, I think, five minutes before I was sure I wanted to invite Bobby to have an office for COOL at Duke. I knew that what [he and Wayne] were up to was special, unusual and maybe the most remarkable thing that's happening right now in student life in this country."

COOL provides on-site consulting to schools, conducts two-day workshops and national conferences, publishes a newsletter and offers, for a fee, a 250-page resource book.

COOL has also written slick-looking guides on how students can do something about illiteracy, the homeless and the environment.

In June, Meisel attended a White House ceremony to receive the Presidential Voluntary Action Award. Last year, the citizens' lobby Common Cause awarded COOL one of its seven Public Service Achievement awards. United Way of America gave COOL its Alexis de Tocqueville Award.

Further encouragement has come by way of letters and phone calls from such people as "Doonesbury" cartoonist Garry B. Trudeau and United Farm Workers President Cesar Chavez.

"They're doing the Lord's work," says Coles, the child psychiatrist who wrote a Pulitzer Prize-winning series on poverty, children and privilege. "Bobby and Wayne are idealistic young people who have so many opportunities and who use their intelligence and energy on behalf of others who are more needy and more vulnerable."

COOL has arrived. But getting there, Payne notes, has been somewhat like two elephants mating: The results don't show up for a long time.

A few years after Meisel's clothes party, he was spotted crossing Harvard Yard in an oversize blue Brooks Brothers shirt, brown tie, green blazer, purple rugby pants and dilapidated running shoes. "He looked like an eggplant," one friend reports.

Meisel was on his way to a formal meeting with Harvard President Derek C. Bok, where he would ask, and receive, moral and financial support for a 1,500-mile "Walk for Love" to 65 colleges between Maine and Washington to spread his gospel of volunteerism.

The idea for this nine-month excursion came after he tired of researching existing volunteer groups. Shortly after his return, he found Hackett, he found funding, and he found enough direction to start COOL.

Meisel and Hackett, both Harvard graduates, sometimes are met with incredulous looks from administrators, foundations, students and peers who regard them as aberrant idealists.

"Aren't students these days too apathetic?" is the common query.

COOL says no. "Often students are just plagued by fear or lack of confidence or lack of knowing what to do," Meisel says. Not all are locked into the preprofessional fast track.

The son of a Presbyterian minister from Minneapolis, Meisel entered college in 1978 with a disheveled mop of hair, a lopsided grin and a future that would include being manager of the women's field hockey team.

After being cut from the soccer team, he decided to start a soccer league for local children and went from dining hall to dining hall asking students to volunteer as coaches. He signed up 150 in one day.

Meisel knows what it means to work through difficulties. In junior high school he was diagnosed as having dyslexia, a learning disability. Meisel struggled to catch up and won a place at The Lawrenceville School in New Jersey, one of the country's most selective prep schools.

Before handing in college assignments, Meisel would make 10 copies, collect 10 pencils and distribute them to 10 friends who would correct his spelling and grammar.

To compensate for his slowness at reading and writing, Meisel never missed a class. He learned by listening, a talent crucial to COOL's work.

Today Meisel's hair is still askew, his wardrobe still chaotic, his operating style still best described as haphazard.

He is a good complement for Hackett, for whom haphazardness across the country in the name of community service comes naturally. Hackett's father, David L. Hackett, masterminded the "domestic Peace Corps" VISTA program while in the Justice Department during the Kennedy administration. David Hackett was also one of Robert F. Kennedy's closest friends, hence his son's name: Robert Kennedy Hackett.

A former rugby All-American, Hackett is the essence of an Ivy League prep. He is deliberate, passionate, articulate; and his ego appears as healthy as his rosy, scrubbed face.

"What's interesting is that some students on campuses say the radicals, or the people who are so-called the most concerned or active, aren't doing any community service," Hackett says as his words stumble to keep pace with his thoughts. "It's the jocks, it's the sorority sisters, it's the quiet students who are doing this stuff."

Meisel and Hackett are now desperately trying to work themselves out of a job. But since COOL's success is due largely to their personalities, a question exists as to whether any staff member is dynamic enough to carry on the pace.

Or to carry on the same lifestyle.

Meisel and Hackett lead the lives of vagabonds; Hackett living out of his red Toyota pickup and Meisel out of his only home, a well-worn royal blue knapsack.

For now, they are satisfied to live on the fame, if not the fortune, of being COOL. All told, Hackett, an English major, and Meisel, a government major, each earned about \$7,000 last year. Few, if any, pay raises loom.

That explains why they have become masters at the art of mooching. If they are not sleeping on dorm room floors, they are occupying the couches of college friends, friends of college friends and families of college friends living everywhere from New Haven, Conn., to Raleigh to San Francisco.

They say they are arriving at noon Monday and show up at midnight Thursday. They say they are leaving Saturday and stick around another week or two.

A few friends have suffered along the way, but a heavy reliance on friendship is, in the long run, one of COOL's strengths.



Wayne Miesel, left, and Bobby Hackett get some work done in the COOL office at Duke University

Staff photo by Robert Willet

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Both Hackett and Meisel know the best method of attracting students to organizational meetings once they arrive on

campus: Offer free food and free beer.

They spend so much time attending college basketball games, fraternity mixers, classes and student government meetings that sometimes they appear to be in the business of professional studenthood.

By so doing, however, they are able to match students' interests with the needs of the community. For an athlete that could mean starting a youth soccer program; for a musician, playing piano in a nursing home; for an English major, tutoring illiterate prisoners.

"It's student-run, student-led, and that's part of the magic of COOL," says Mark N. Langseth, a University of Minnesota graduate who is promoting student volunteerism in Minnesota. "They're able to find people on every campus and get them fired up about this stuff."

Hackett and Meisel call themselves "roads scholars," but others, unable to find anything but legendary figures to compare them with, go so far as to call them the Johnny Appleseeds and Pied Pipers of volunteerism.

COOL's funding consists of grants from groups such as the Ford Foundation, the Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, the Lyndhurst Foundation, the Public Welfare Foundation, the Hazen Foundation and the Roosevelt Centennial Youth Project. This fiscal year its projected budget is \$300,000.

COOL doesn't insist that people get involved for altruistic reasons. Many of its workers are earning fellowships, internships and academic credit for their community work, which raises the question of whether the projects become more important than the people they are meant to help.

Ms. Scatliff's attitude is, so what?

Either the volunteers will drop out quickly, she reasons, or they'll stay long enough to discover that what they're doing is worthwhile.

When Meisel arrived at the Carleton College campus two years ago, he found a flimsy group of about 60 student volunteers. In one week, he had commitments from administrators to provide office space and a phone and to hire a campus coordinator. Today, about 350 students are actively involved in community service.

A year and a half ago, Wayne visited Concord College in Athens, W.Va., where he found a student

service desert. He talked the president into hiring a program director and to date, the group has organized three fund drives for the hungry and the homeless, established a Big Brother/Big Sister program, helped manage a local community center and established a literacy program for adults.

"Before Wayne, we had zero student volunteers. Now, we have about 175," says Robert G. Schlegel, the school's volunteer program director who attended the COOL Summit at Duke to get more pointers. "When people from COOL stop by, and they've been down on four or five visits, it really excites the students, it gets them moving."

Hackett and Meisel are idealists, but they are not naive. They simply are willing to invest in hope and have a talent for making others believe in it, too.

"I think there's a lot more moral concern among young people today than some of our social critics and political readers give them credit for having," Coles says. "Though I think that Bobby and Wayne are exceptional in certain ways, I don't think they're all that different in important respects." They are not the only young people whose moral concerns are backed up by moral commitment.

Both Meisel and Hackett like to talk about the Golden Rule.

"I spoke at my father's church on Father's Day about that, and people would look at me like I was crazy," Meisel says. "As a kid you're taught all this stuff in church and at camp and in school and then you graduate from college and they tell you, 'Just kidding! It doesn't apply to you anymore.'"

Meisel believes it does apply. He's just trying to think of a way to convince others of that, and, in his words, "turn a whole generation around" with what Mother Teresa calls "the joy of service."

"I hate the word salesman," he says of his work, as the Duke Summit is winding down for the day. "People have accused me of that. To them, I just say, 'Yes, but we give it away.'"