Cleveland Justis ’04 came to the Graduate School of Management from the nonprofit world looking to learn hard business skills, make business connections and take on leadership opportunities. He got much more than he expected.

“For me, it was this exposure to remarkable students, research and faculty and a great group of cohorts,” Justis said. “It’s made me a stronger business leader. It’s made me more collaborative in my work. I’ve formed lifelong friendships out of my time there.”

Justis started volunteering at the School while a student and never stopped. For his efforts giving back to the School and the community, the GSM Alumni Association awarded him the 2009–2010 Outstanding Service Award. While he is grateful, he doesn’t want to take all the credit. “I’m humbled by it,” he said. “I don’t really feel like I deserve it. I’d love to give it to our class.”

Justis said he hopes he can serve as a model for other alumni. “We’re a small school and if we all give back to the greatest degree we can, either financially or with time… the School will continue to be stronger.”

Justis gives back, both with time and donations, because he feels strongly he should support institutions that have given much to him. While at the School he served as student body president, and was involved in several clubs, including the Davis chapter of Net Impact, an international network of business leaders who use business to generate social change.

He helped launch the School’s MBA Challenge for Charity chapter and was instrumental in getting nearly every member of the Class of 2004 to contribute to the School’s endowment. Justis started with the Class of 2004 but took an extra year to graduate after becoming executive director of the Sausalito-based nonprofit Headlands Institute, which teaches children and teens about science and the environment.

Since graduating, Justis has been a visiting lecturer to teach the School’s first social entrepreneurship class. He also has hosted student interns and student visitors at work, and introduced alumni to job opportunities and participated in informational and mock interviews. He talks up UC Davis at conferences. And Justis joined his peers in recruiting classmates to donate money and name a classroom in Gallagher Hall.

He wants his social entrepreneurship students to know their MBA education is useful for endeavors beyond big business. They can start their own ventures or work in the nonprofit or governmental sectors to solve society’s most pressing problems. As director of the new nonprofit Institute at the Golden Gate, Justis taps the center’s network in the nonprofit, business and government worlds to fight environmental degradation and promote global sustainability. The center is part of the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy, which launched a $150 million private-public partnership to restore Fort Baker near Sausalito. The institute is part of that project.

“I feel like business is the most powerful force ever, and has a real obligation to be a part of solving environmental problems,” Justis said. “The most powerful solutions come when you [combine] the power of business with the regulatory power of government and the flexibility of the nonprofit sector. Business has an obligation to set a really high bar and be a great example.”