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## Developing Vincentian Leaders through Service Learning

BY

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In a talk at Niagara University, 18 October 1993, the Very Reverend Robert P. Maloney, C.M., said:

I hope that every student who graduates from Niagara has a deep sense of the poor. This is a Vincentian university. The name Vincent de Paul means, almost everywhere in the world, "one who loves the poor." Put aside your prejudices about the poor. Learn to know them face to face. The poorest of the poor here in the United States, and in fact throughout the world, are little children, the elderly, women... break through any fears that might hold you back; have some concrete contact with the poor during your time here at Niagara. If you do, not only will you touch their lives, but they will change your lives too.<sup>1</sup>

The name Niagara Falls brings to mind the picture of the majestic and beautiful waterfalls that are a draw for tourists who flock here during all four seasons. Each season brings a different look and feel to the attraction. The city of Niagara Falls, New York, stands in contrast to its counterpart less than a mile across the Niagara River. Niagara Falls, Ontario, Canada, is a booming, growing city with a vibrant tourism industry and expanding base of hotels and restaurants to support it. But Niagara Falls, N.Y., is a city that has fallen on hard times.

During the first seven decades of the twentieth century, the city of Niagara Falls had a solid industrial base, primarily focused on the chemical industry. These plants offered the opportunity for good, well-paying jobs and the city in the 1980 census boasted a population of about 120,000. Chemical plants dotted the banks of the Niagara River for several miles above the Falls.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Maloney, C.M., "Vincentian Education Convocation Address," presented at Niagara University, 18 October 1993.

However, regulations for the disposal of chemical wastes became more stringent during the 1970s and 1980s. These regulations prohibited the discharge of wastes into the Niagara River. As a result, the industry began to move out and relocate. The city lost population to the point that in the 2000 census less than 60,000 inhabitants remained. Niagara Falls is the largest urban area in Niagara County, which is located in western New York State, on the Canadian border, and within a hundred-mile radius of such major cities as Buffalo, Rochester, and Toronto. The county has a land area of 1,354 square kilometers and a population (2000) of 219,846, including 8.84 percent minorities — primarily African Americans and Native Americans. In 2000, 71.4 percent of the county's population lived in urban areas and 28.5 percent in rural areas.

Niagara Falls has become a city populated disproportionately by low-income people. The two largest population groups are aging, southern, and eastern European ethnic whites, and a slightly younger group of low-income minorities. In 2000, 20.4 percent of the city's population was over the age of sixty, while the city also accounted for 80 percent of Niagara County's African American population. Niagara County likewise has a high percentage of people living below the poverty line; 13.5 percent of the families with children under the age of eighteen, 10.6 percent of individuals between eighteen and sixty-five years of age, and 9 percent of individuals over the age of sixty-five have annual incomes below the poverty line.



Aerial view of Niagara University.  
*Public Domain*

Niagara University is located at the boundary of the city of Niagara Falls, on the Niagara River Gorge, five miles north of the Falls. The university experience attempts to embody the altruistic spirit of Vincent de Paul.

As declared in its mission statement, Niagara “seeks to inspire its students to serve all members of society, especially the poor and oppressed, in local communities and in the larger world.”<sup>2</sup>

In 1965 a group of Niagara University students and two faculty, one a Vincentian priest, founded the Niagara University Community Action Program (NUCAP) as a student-run organization funded by student government. These students and faculty were motivated by a desire to contribute their talents to the betterment of the local community, which even in 1965 was beginning to feel the impact of a changing economy. The faculty moderators of NUCAP established relationships with community agencies and schools throughout Niagara County. Within a few years, NUCAP had grown and was placing two to three hundred students each year in service sites. Campus Ministry assumed responsibility for administering the program and the moderator was a staff member within their structure. As economic conditions within the Niagara Falls and Niagara County areas deteriorated, the service that Niagara University students provided increased.

By the middle of the 1980s it was obvious that the city was in trouble. The downtown area had been bulldozed in the name of urban renewal. Unfortunately no new businesses took the place of the ones that had left. Along with these developments, faculty were faced with an increasingly apathetic student population quite different from the activist students of the 1960s, and they were struggling with the question of how to best improve the learning environment. However, there was also a lively discussion among faculty — especially those in the social sciences, Religious Studies, and Philosophy — about the nature of Vincentian education. While it is certainly important that students know the face of the poor, higher education has another aim: to allow students to explore the systemic causes of poverty and begin to develop and encourage short and long-term solutions. With this in mind, some faculty began to develop curriculum that attempted to address the needs of the community within the academic content. This endeavor is one aspect of “Vincentian education (which) is... viewed as central to the Vincentian mission of service to the Poor. As such it strives to integrate this vision into the educational process and to keep the primacy of it alive among all those who share in this common mission.”<sup>3</sup> Faculty were, in fact, developing service-learning pedagogy without knowing the term. These classes were very well received, and faculty found that the atmosphere in the classroom was dramatically changed, with students beginning to ask the correct questions and becoming more interested in their academic work. They

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<sup>2</sup> *Niagara University Undergraduate Catalog* (2007-2009), page 4.

<sup>3</sup> Louise Sullivan, D.C., *The Core Values of Vincentian Education* (Niagara University, 1994).

began to see that what they were learning in the classroom did have practical implications and impacts for the broader community.

The work of faculty in integrating service with academic content continued to grow. Increasingly the moderator of NUCAP was pressed into service to identify new community sites and projects for faculty. In 1989, Reverend Brian O'Connell, C.M., assumed the presidency of Niagara University. Reverend O'Connell was convinced that, like Saint Vincent who "marshaled all the resources he could find in the service of the poor," Niagara University must do likewise, making the university's resources more accessible to the needy local community.<sup>4</sup> An opportunity to expand and enhance the service-learning initiative presented itself when in 1994, the Corporation for National Service, a federal government agency, announced that grants would be available for colleges and universities to develop and implement service-learning programs. Niagara University received one of the original sixty-four grants, totaling approximately \$190,000 over a three-year period. *Learn and Serve Niagara* came into existence in the fall of 1994.

Service learning involves active learning where students are able to reflect upon the experience of performing community service work within the structured context of course content. Students develop research, critical thinking, and interpersonal skills and come to appreciate the larger social, ethical, and environmental implications of knowledge. Service learning enriches content areas by fostering social responsibility and intellectual and ethical reasoning. Additionally, as stated in its mission statement, Niagara University is a Vincentian institution with the goal of instilling in students a lifelong commitment to the poor. A Vincentian graduate ought to have the ability to assume a leadership role on the community as well. The Vincentian leader is one who truly respects Saint Vincent's commitment to the poor, speaking and acting in a way that expresses a commitment to making the world a place where the poor are assisted and poverty alleviated.<sup>5</sup>

Students are made aware of the Vincentian character of Niagara in a number of ways. In the description of the university it is stated clearly that Niagara is a Catholic and Vincentian university. These descriptive terms are referred to in presentations during the orientation process and restated in speeches given by the university president and other senior administrators. Additionally, a part of the first year seminar that every student is required to take is devoted to the life and work of Saint Vincent de Paul and

<sup>4</sup> Robert P. Maloney, C.M., "Actualizing the Mission Today," *Vincentiana* (May-June 1997): 165-185.

<sup>5</sup> See *Ibid.*; also Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., and Edward R. Udovic, C.M., "The Vincentian Higher Education Apostolate in the United States," *Vincentian Heritage* 22:1 (2001): 35-43; and Sullivan, *Core Values*.

the way in which his vision of service to the poor is made visible at Niagara University. In Religious Studies classes such as Introduction to Christianity, in Philosophy classes such as Ethics, and in other classes such as Sociology and Social Work, the importance of service is highlighted. Faculty, administrators, and staff take seriously the mission work of the university, modeling through their participation in service-related activities that this is a work for the entire community.

In this tradition, thousands of Niagara University students have participated in the projects sponsored through Learn & Serve Niagara. In 1999, all of the service-learning projects and service conducted through the Student Government were combined under its umbrella. This reorganization included NUCAP. Throughout its thirty-three year history, NUCAP has been at the forefront in the development of Vincentian student leadership. It is a student-run organization with a staff moderator, led by a board consisting of six to twelve students selected by the students themselves from among those who have been actively involved in its service activities. The board is responsible for scheduling and implementing twelve to fifteen service activities per semester. Students plan these activities, which traditionally involve inviting the community's young people to campus to swim, roller skate, and ice skate; visiting nursing homes; participating in community clean-ups and blood drives; and sponsoring events for developmentally disabled adults. The students are responsible for every aspect of each event.

What has been impressive is the way in which this board comes together as an entity that models Vincentian values. Traditionally its members are those who consistently participate in service activities and are enthusiastic about them. They come from every college and major in the university. Among the board members, friendships gradually develop that transcend the four years they spend at Niagara University. These students model the importance of service and participate in multiple service activities. For example, this January three NUCAP board members are in Panama, working with the Vincentian community there in a number of service venues. Through a partnership with Campus Ministry, other Vincentian student leaders participate regularly in immersion experiences, during the January or Easter breaks in areas such as Philadelphia, Brooklyn, or — most recently — in the Gulf South in the aftermath of Katrina. These board members have credited their NUCAP experience with helping them develop leadership skills that they have carried into their careers. The bond to NUCAP continues for years after graduation, with alumni returning for reunions and visiting the office.

If the spirit of Saint Vincent is to continue in Vincentian institutions of higher education, these institutions must strive to create a culture in which living embodiments of the mission are visible, striving to teach, primarily

by example, the culture's values to new members of the community. This becomes increasingly important as religious members of the community decrease in number. Vincentian leaders must embody the core values of the founding community, being living symbols of the mission in addition to speaking and writing about it.<sup>6</sup>

Some examples of the outstanding leaders produced by this program will provide evidence of the effectiveness of incorporating service into the academic curriculum.

In the mid-1990s, a young woman enrolled at Niagara University. She came from a very privileged family. Her father was the general manager of one of the major sports teams in Buffalo. The young woman, named Jen, declared a major in Communication Studies with her sights set on joining the communication department of her father's team. During her first semester, through her Religious Studies class, she participated in a NUCAP event and she encountered some children who were attending the after-school program at the Center for Joy, an inner-city center for children and parents. Jen began to help out in the program, tutoring the children three afternoons a week.

During the Christmas season, the city of Niagara Falls sponsored a Festival of Lights, decorating the downtown area with holiday exhibits. A highlight of the festival was a parade that took place the weekend after Thanksgiving. The Center for Joy invited local children to attend the parade and many Niagara University students, including Jen, volunteered to accompany them. One little girl, Misty, arrived to participate, and Jen noticed that she had no winter boots or mittens; she wore a light summer-weight dress and a thread-bare coat. Horrified, since she had never encountered such a child, Jen offered to give Misty her gloves. Misty suggested that they each wear one glove and hold hands to keep their other hand warm. This experience had a profound effect on Jen, who continued to volunteer at the Center for Joy and ultimately joined its board of directors, taking a major role in planning its events. Jen and Misty enjoyed a close personal relationship, with their families playing an active role in each other's lives. Jen's career plans were also altered; she abandoned her earlier ideas about her future and chose instead to pursue a career in the volunteer management arena, where she is still employed today. Unfortunately Misty's story does not have a happy ending: several years ago, she and some friends were playing in a derelict neighborhood playground when a decaying swing set toppled and killed her. One now sees many individuals in that community wearing lapel pins shaped as mittens to honor Misty and her friend Jen, and to remind people of the community's terrible needs.

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<sup>6</sup> Dennis H. Holtschneider, C.M., "No Small Matter: Leadership for Institutional Culture in Vincentian Higher Education," *Vincentian Heritage* 23-25:2, 26:1 (2005): 105-122.

The Eastern Province Vincentians provide some scholarship funds for students who do substantial service during their time at Niagara University. Several of these Vincentian Scholars have developed and led very impressive service initiatives. One was a Theater Studies major who tutored in an after-school program at another inner-city center, the Francis Center, which is sponsored by the Franciscan Sisters of Penance and Christian Charity. The children there were impressed that she could sing, dance, and act and were constantly asking her questions about the experience of appearing on stage. Partnering with the Sisters on the center's staff, she put together a plan to incorporate singing, dancing, and acting into the schedule of the after-school program. Her curriculum used these disciplines to help improve the children's literacy and mathematical skills. Obviously, also providing a great deal of fun for the children. After, this particular student graduated, other theater students continued the tradition at the center.

The list of special projects developed and led by Niagara students is lengthy, but I will add a few more here. One young woman participated in service learning through her major in Social Work. In her course work she became interested in exploring opportunities to help children in Africa. She searched the Internet and found an organization called Invisible Children. "Motivated by the unseen war in Northern Uganda, Invisible Children was created by three young filmmakers with a singular mission: To use the power of stories to change lives around the world."<sup>7</sup> This student was so moved by the stories she read that she organized a student group on campus, which to date has raised several thousand dollars to support the activities of the parent group in Uganda.

These experiences with service learning extend well beyond graduation. Michael J. Delaney, a 1983 graduate of Niagara University, was presented with the Perboyre Medal — named for Saint John Gabriel Perboyre, C.M., a Vincentian priest martyred in China in 1840, which recognizes extraordinary contributions and service to the global society after the examples of the gospels, Saint Vincent de Paul and Perboyre — at the convocation celebrating Vincentian Heritage Week last fall. Mr. Delaney was awarded the medal in recognition for his work as director of humanitarian assistance for Oxfam America. During his time as a student at Niagara University he was a Vincentian seminarian and an active participant in the activities of NUCAP, as well as an enthusiastic rugby player. In his speech at the convocation he said:

As I look back and reflect on my life, the decision that has had the most impact and changed me was the one to join

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<sup>7</sup> Available online at: <http://www.invisiblechildren.com/about/>



the Vincentian seminary and attend Niagara University. I learned of Saint Vincent's focus on and service to the poor. My world expanded as I was exposed to the poor in the streets of Niagara Falls, or when given the chance to work with the hidden poor in the fields of Kalamazoo, Michigan. I was exposed to great women and men who would visit from their work with the poor in Panama. At Niagara, the theory of service became real.<sup>8</sup>

The key to Niagara University's success in instilling in all its members a culture of service is the passion of its faculty, staff, and students, who invite each other and people outside the university to work side-by-side in these endeavors. In the hiring process for faculty, the deans make a point of talking to prospective faculty members about the university's mission. It is considered important that they be supportive of its Catholic and Vincentian character. The orientation process for new faculty emphasizes the role of mission, and especially the role of service. Faculty are introduced to the central role of service learning within the university's academic courses, and are encouraged to consider to adopt such pedagogy.



Niagara University, New York.  
*Public Domain*

Likewise, in the orientation process for new staff members, the role of mission is stressed. Every five years, faculty and staff are invited to participate in a special three-hour session to deepen their knowledge of, and commitment

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<sup>8</sup> Lisa McMahon, "Emissaries to the Third World," *Eagle Magazine* (Niagara University, Fall 2007), 12-15.

to, the values expressed in the mission statement. They become powerful role models for students and the newer members of the university community, in that they enthusiastically relate their experiences and help facilitate their work. Faculty regularly participates in service-learning activity with students, thus enhancing the experience and acting as an excellent on-site resource to help students process what they encounter. Coaches of the sixteen Division I athletic teams have worked side-by-side with their players to mentor elementary and secondary students; last Christmas, each team aided a local family with food and gifts. Students enrolled in the ROTC program have also put together a project to visit hospitalized veterans on a regular basis. Hospitality students and their professor provide services for the residents of the Ronald McDonald House connected with Roswell Park Cancer Center. Students, faculty, and staff also routinely help with the building of houses through Habitat for Humanity. This passion and spirit is infectious.

As Sister Nora Gatto, D.C., executive director of University Mission and Ministry, said about Niagara's mission in a recent article: "It's a powerful force that blows through campus and catches everything in its path."<sup>9</sup> That powerful force infected NU's director of sponsored research, Adrienne Leibowitz, who applied for one of the newly established Research and Project Awards to Address Poverty. These grants were created jointly by the Reverend Joseph L. Lévesque, C.M., president of Niagara University, and the Eastern Province Vincentian Community. These awards are designed to support research and/or direct service projects that broaden the understanding of poverty. Ms. Leibowitz received a \$3,000 grant that enabled her to spend three weeks in the African country of Malawi at the Malawi Children's Village, a community-based organization that serves AIDS orphans and other vulnerable children, and also to work with Orphan Support Africa, a group that supports existing community-based organizations throughout Malawi and Tanzania. During her time in Africa, Ms. Leibowitz put her expertise to work providing strategic planning support, technical assistance, and direct service to children. Since her return she has continued to be involved with the organization, and recently accepted a leadership position on the board of directors of the Malawi Children's Village Foundation.

Another example is that of Niagara University's assistant director of admissions, Maria Torres. After earning a Master's degree in school counseling last May, she celebrated the accomplishment by serving with forty-seven other volunteers at the Somos Amigos Medical Missions' clinic in the Dominican Republic. This mission brings medical and dental care to people living in underdeveloped countries. Ms. Torres met the organization's

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<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

director, Frank Brightwell, by chance when he was attending an event at the university. At the clinic she worked thirteen to fourteen-hour days, primarily as a translator enabling non-Spanish-speaking medical professionals to communicate with local inhabitants. She, like Adrienne Leibowitz, describes her experiences as life-altering. "What is important is not materialistic or money," she notes. "It is becoming one with others, becoming one with your communities and getting involved, being open to sharing your gifts and talents with others. Doing that, and making a difference, is a start to making the world better."<sup>10</sup>

While I have singled out several examples of projects and of individuals who have taken the Niagara University mission to heart, there is a broader question about the role of engaging students in service learning: What does it add to the entire educational experience? Recent research suggests that students who engage in well-integrated academic service-learning gain a new perspective on social problems. Faculty and students alike report that the experience has presented them with new questions, such as those about the systemic causes of poverty. For example, I was speaking with a student recently who had been looking at the issue of hunger. She mentioned rather incredulously that she had never asked why institutions such as soup kitchens were needed. Students also appear to become more involved with issues of social justice, and this opens an opportunity for faculty to introduce them to the rich tradition of Catholic social thought. They talk freely about the transformational value of the service-learning experience. Research and reports from faculty on campus support the contention that students actually learn this material better through the service-learning experience than in a classroom. Every spring, for example, students in a tax accounting class complete tax returns for elderly and disabled people in the local community, and their professor reports an improvement in their comprehension and retention of knowledge.

Many factors have come together to develop the ethos of service that one experiences on the campus of Niagara University today. It is not possible to point to the introduction of service learning as the sole contributor to the development of this spirit. Service learning is but one vehicle through which the university's mission is communicated from one member of the community to another. More is involved, however the constant mention of the mission in classrooms, and in public remarks by administrators and faculty, in encouraging members of the community to engage in service, keep the mission at the forefront of university life. Students, faculty, and staff actively seek out opportunities to develop and lead service activities. Faculty regularly report that students encourage them to incorporate a service-learning component

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

into their courses. For example, a student in a logistics class approached the faculty member about bringing fair-trade coffee and other products to the university. The students then put their new skills to work in arranging for the transportation and importation of these products, which they then sold on campus.

In reading and studying the life and writings of Saint Vincent de Paul, it is seen that he gathered people together to study and reflect on their obligation to aid the more unfortunate members of society — but also that he required what was learned be put into action in venturing out two-by-two to serve the poor. The parallel can be seen here at Niagara University. Students, faculty, and staff study, reflect and serve together, and then go out to serve the greater community.