



# New York Campus Compact

## Occasional Papers

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*The New York Campus Compact Occasional Papers are publications designed to advance an understanding of and appreciation for collegiate civic engagement in its many forms. Occasional Papers will describe promising practices in service learning and civic engagement, and the role of civic engagement programs in fulfilling institutional missions and promoting student learning. Manuscripts are invited that represent the viewpoints and experiences of the variety of individuals who have a stake in civic engagement - presidents, academic administrators, faculty, students, and community partners.*

**Editor's Note:** *The Rochester Youth Year (RYY) Fellowship is an AmeriCorps\*VISTA sponsored program administered by the Rochester Regional Network (RRN), a consortium of seven local colleges: The College at Brockport, Nazareth College, Roberts Wesleyan College, Rochester Institute of Technology, St. John Fisher College, SUNY Geneseo, and the University of Rochester. RYY places recent graduates of RRN colleges in community-based organizations for one year to create or expand initiatives that address the various challenges facing youth and families in Rochester. On January 3, 2012, Rochester Youth Year held its annual meeting. At the meeting, Daan Braveman, President of Nazareth College, a founding member of the New York Campus Compact, addressed the participants. With his permission, President Braveman's remarks have been published herein as a **The New York Campus Compact Occasional Papers.***

## Making a Difference Through Civic Engagement

By Daan Braveman  
Nazareth College

I was very pleased to be asked to speak at a program that recognizes the significant role played by the colleges in this region in addressing some of the challenges facing the youth and their families in our community. I believe quite strongly - indeed, some might say, passionately - that colleges have an obligation to make a difference in local, national and even international communities. And, I want to use my time here to underscore the reasons we should be actively engaged in our communities. I know I may be preaching to the choir, but I think it is important that we remind ourselves of the reasons programs like the Rochester Youth Year Fellowship are so vital.

To explain what I mean by making a difference I often begin with a story that I heard many years ago. I was attending a speech by bell hooks, a well-known scholar and teacher. hooks' speech was about the problems facing women of color throughout the world, and at the end of her speech a student in the back of the room raised her hand to ask a question.

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The student observed that the problems seemed so overwhelming, and she asked how she could possibly have an impact - how she could make a difference. bell responded by mentioning that a week or so prior to the talk she was standing in line at a grocery store waiting to check out. The woman in front of her had a cartload of groceries and was trying to place them on the belt while at the same time holding an infant who was crying and fidgeting. bell asked the woman if she wanted her to hold the baby. The woman gave bell the baby (who then quieted down), unloaded her cart, checked out, and thanked bell as she took her baby and left the store. The point of this story, bell told the college student, is that we all operate in spaces and within those spaces we have the opportunity to make a difference in someone else's life.

Academic institutions operate in relatively large spaces and have that capacity as well. Indeed, we have enormous opportunities to make a difference in the lives of our students, faculty, staff, alumni, and friends, as well as in the lives of those around us. Many of you are well aware that college students often participate in community service projects, volunteering to work in a variety of settings. During orientation of new students many colleges have their students participate in a day of service. Last August, at Nazareth we had 500 faculty, staff, and students serve at over 20 sites throughout the community.

I am sure that you are also aware that many college students are involved in campus-sponsored blood drives, food and clothing drives and fund-raising campaigns for charities. These kinds of community service projects are important in providing needed services in the community, and their value should not be understated.

But, what I want to suggest here today is more systemic, a model where civic engagement is integrated into a school's

core functions of learning and discovery. In this model, community service is not something that students engage in during their free time and only on occasion. Rather, service becomes part of the very fabric of the college's mission, integrated with academic programs as well as scholarly pursuits.

The idea that civic engagement should be part of a college's core mission may seem rather uncontroversial. But, there are many who disagree with the proposition that community engagement should be central to a college's purposes. These folks, to be sure, are not opposed to community service. For them, however, it is an activity that students, faculty and staff should do on their own as extracurricular activities, not tied to the essential learning, teaching, and scholarly functions of the college.

Stanley Fish - a Yale trained and well known scholar in the academic world who has taught at a number of schools including Berkeley, Johns Hopkins, and Duke to name a few - wrote a book entitled *Save the World on Your Own Time*. The title perhaps says it all and best captures his view that colleges should not be involved in community engagement. Simply put, for Fish the academy is solely about the pursuit of truth and giving students the analytical skills to pursue that truth. Community engagement, he believes, is at best a distraction from those goals and at worst can lead to political indoctrination.

I do not have the time and this is not the place for an extended critique of Fish's book. To be sure, he is correct that the development of intellectual skills is one of the essential goals of higher education. But as Derek Bok, the former president of Harvard, stresses, it is not the only goal. Other goals of an undergraduate education, states Bok, include development of moral reasoning, preparation of students for their civic responsibilities, preparation for



living with diversity and in a global world, and preparation for work.<sup>1</sup> I side with Bok and others like Ernest Boyer who was one of the distinguished educators of the past decades. Boyer wrote that “what is needed (for higher education) is not just more programs, but a larger purpose, a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction.”<sup>2</sup>

Similarly, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching places heavy emphasis on civic engagement and sees a direct connection between that kind of engagement and a sound college education. Two writers for the Foundation observed:

Our quarrel. . . is . . . with the tendency in the academy to treat analytical thinking, along with mastery of substantive content, as *sufficient* goals for higher education. When this happens, the over-emphasis on analytical thinking creates an academic culture that reveres analytical rigor as the *only* important consideration, disconnecting rigorous thinking from sources of human meaning and value. . . . In order to prepare for decision and action in the world, students need to develop not only facility with concepts and critical analysis but also judgment about real situations in all their particularity, ambiguity, uncertainty and complexity.<sup>3</sup>

I suggest that a civic or community engagement model of education serves at least four purposes. These purposes can be served by all forms of civic engagement regardless of whether or not they are part of service learning courses.

<sup>1</sup> Bok, Derek. 2006. *Our Underachieving Colleges*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 58-81.

<sup>2</sup> Boyer, Ernest. (1994, March 9). *Creating the new American College*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, A48.

<sup>3</sup> Colby, Anne and William M. Sullivan. *Strengthening the Foundations of Students' Excellence, Integrity and Social Contribution*, *Liberal Education*, Vol. 95, No. 1, (Winter 2009).

First, of course, it provides much needed assistance to the local community. But a word of caution is in order with respect to that assistance. The nature of the help must be determined by the group assisted not by the students or college. In some instances, community service programs - in a laudable effort to do good - are driven by what the college thinks is needed rather than what the affected community thinks is needed. Such well-meaning paternalism, however, needs to be avoided.

A second goal of the community service model is to integrate theory and practice, to connect the academic with the real world. I like a quote that has been attributed to Ben Franklin. The saying is one you may know: “Tell me, I forget. Teach me, I may remember. Involve me and I learn.” Community engagement emphasizes active learning experiences in which students are involved in internships, placements, and other forms of service learning where they have the opportunity to discover how the material they are reading about in the books is applied in the world around them. This kind of active, involved learning allows them to develop a deeper understanding of the classroom material and a greater appreciation for its practical application.

A third purpose or goal of civic engagement is not only to enable students to better understand the classroom material but also to enable them to reflect on the structural causes of the problems they see in their service component and to begin thinking about how those causes might be remedied. Quite often the service aspect exposes students to issues of poverty, class and race - issues that many students do not often observe first hand in their lives before college or even in their lives on college campuses.

One of our teaching goals is to enable students to discover multiple perspectives on problems. In some respects, this is what we mean by developing “critical thinking”

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skills. A friend who was Chair of the Religion Department at Syracuse University commented that good thinking skills give students the ability to get from point A to point B. *Critical* thinking skills give them the ability to assess whether the journey is worth making. To make that assessment, students need to develop an ability to analyze matters from a range of perspectives. Community service projects add to those perspectives, often giving college students opportunities to discover and understand matters relating to poverty and issues affecting people from different ethnic and racial backgrounds.

A community engagement model serves a fourth purpose as well. Through integration of service and learning, students will be instilled with a sense of civic responsibility that will allow them to become effective citizens in their years after college. We in the academic world are involved with shaping the lives of our students. Over 90 years ago at a meeting of college presidents, a speaker observed that teachers are not

“teachers of subjects; they are fundamentally teachers of persons. And the great passion of the teacher should not be the passion of the language he teaches or the literature that he teaches but the passion of the life that he is shaping, with language and with literature.”

In conclusion, I want to repeat an observation I have made on many occasions. I believe that a college education has a ripple effect across generations. Our job is to create opportunity where none existed before—opportunity to learn, opportunity to grow, and opportunity to serve. We give a great deal to our students during their time with us, but perhaps the greatest gift of all is the opportunity to give back, to make a real difference in the world their children will inherit.

The individuals we recognize today as Rochester Youth Year Fellows certainly learned this lesson, and I applaud each of you.

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