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Since its inception in 2001, the New York Campus Compact has conducted conferences and training sessions for nearly 2000 participants, including faculty, staff, students and community partners.

## READER QUERY:

What do you consider the most essential publication on your civic engagement bookshelf? Email your responses to Robert Bonfiglio, Vice President for Student and Campus Life at SUNY Geneseo at [bonfig@geneseo.edu](mailto:bonfig@geneseo.edu). Responses will be published in a future edition of the Occasional Papers.

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## 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.*

*Publication guidelines and contact information can be obtained on the New York Campus Compact web site – [www.nycc.cornell.edu](http://www.nycc.cornell.edu).*

*Editor's Note:* On September 17, 2008, President David J. Skorton of Cornell University spoke at the Sage Chapel Midday Program on the topic of "Engaged Citizenship and the Role of Higher Education." With his permission, President Skorton's remarks are featured in this edition of the [New York Campus Compact Occasional Papers](#).

This [Occasional Paper](#) concludes with a commentary on higher education and community service by New York State Senator Kenneth P. LaValle.

## Engaged Citizenship and the Role of Higher Education

By David J. Skorton

Most of us have been taught, since early childhood, to be "good citizens." From obeying family rules, to obeying the law, to casting an informed vote on Election Day, we all know the basics of participating in a civilized society. But today I want to talk about a concept that goes a step beyond these basics—the concept of engaged citizenship.

It's the word "engaged" I want to focus on first. We may be "involved," we may "participate" or "contribute." But to be engaged suggests a process that goes deeper, that's more intrinsic to who we are and perhaps more valuable to our society. "Engaged" suggests a practical, essential connection.

One can be an engaged citizen at a local level, or nationally, or in a global sense. One can be engaged in overtly

political ways—campaigning, voting—but one can also be engaged by volunteering, whether by helping to clean up a park, or starting a music program, or working in a shelter for the homeless. The specifics of civic engagement—the ways we choose to engage—are not always of the apple-and-motherhood variety. Civic engagement can be controversial. Your goals may be far different from mine; you may not like some of my methods. But despite our differences, to be engaged—deeply, in good faith—is almost always both a public and a personal good. It's a role that helps meet community needs as it strengthens the individual.

Why do we in higher education care about civic engagement? We have a responsibility not only to train the mind but also to develop personal and social responsibility in students.

At Cornell this sense is particularly strong, due to our status as the state's land-grant university and our long tradition of commitment to public service. Universities have tax-exempt status and public funding—therefore universities should give back, by bringing research results to the public. We expect our graduates to lead our society in constructive directions, whether they work in business, government, law, education, engineering, the arts, or any other field. And we expect them to disagree—just like the faculty members who teach them—faculty collectively described by the late Professor Carl Becker as people who “think otherwise.”

The core functions of the university—education, discovery, creativity, public service—lead to all kinds of direct action benefiting society. This university performs both basic and translational research—research that can be translated into beneficial action. For example, with the help of a \$26.8 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, we are launching a major collaborative research project to combat stem rust—a disease with the potential to devastate wheat production worldwide.

Equally important in terms of civic engagement is the university's role in public culture. The university nourishes the creation of works of visual, literary and performing art, and it offers those works to the public. Here, too, scholarship in the humanities and social sciences can thrive, giving cultural and ethical context and balance to the so-called hard sciences.

Institutions of higher education are sometimes accused of being ivory towers—secluded, aloof, escapist, impractical. Cornell is anything but that. We want to be—and I believe we are—a structure of a very different sort. Not made of pristine ivory, but of a multitude of practical materials. A tower tall enough for taking a long view, but not so tall that we don't breathe the same air as everyone else. A tower with a strong foundation in its native soil—an area that was once part of the Cayuga Nation—and quite literally involved in the land, through the work of our College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. A tower whose denizens don't seclude themselves, but are actively engaged

in the larger world, and whose chief aspiration is to challenge each other's approaches to thinking through problems and creating new solutions. We are part of a community—many communities—from the city of Ithaca to the state, the nation, the world.

One of the roles that higher education plays in fostering engaged citizenship is a structured one: a huge variety of courses, as well as study abroad programs, educate people about the world and its needs. Knowledge, both theoretical and practical, gives us tools for effective engagement. The Cornell Public Service Center is a terrific resource for those interested in volunteer work and the abundance of service opportunities that Cornell offers, including:

- Service-learning courses, in which learning involves doing;
- Into the Streets, the annual day of service when students work with local agencies;
- Alternative Spring Break, through which students travel for service projects.

Not only individuals and groups but the university as a whole is engaged with its community. For example, Cornell is working closely with the community on a range of initiatives designed to lessen the environmental and quality-of-life impact of large numbers of students and employees commuting to Cornell. The university is promoting alternative transportation through such initiatives as park-and-ride lots, free bus passes, pedestrian and bicycle routes, vanpools, and the Ithaca Carshare program. Cornell is also committed to working with local agencies to increase the supply of affordable housing in the area.

Higher education also plays a less formal role in civic engagement—as a superb arena for personal development. Particularly for students—young people learning to be independent, trying on new roles—the university can be a place to develop into more involved citizens, prepared to contribute to positive change. It happens through the structured opportunities I've already mentioned, but also, and perhaps most powerfully, through less structured contact with faculty, staff, and

other students. A major factor in one's college experience is the quality of fellow students. Are they curious and full of ideas? Do they take the initiative? Do they make you think outside your own particular box? Here at Cornell, you don't have to look far to find people who will make you think—and act—whether they are students, faculty, staff, or distinguished visitors.

Cornell is full of engaged citizens—people who use their talents for the public good, whether through their jobs or through volunteer efforts. Student Babette Stern '09 received a national award, the Swearer Student Humanitarian Award, for co-founding Cover Africa, a student organization dedicated to reducing the global burden of malaria, and for organizing a service-learning course on malaria intervention in Ghana. Numerous faculty members devote their research efforts to the understanding and mitigation of poverty, hunger, and disease around the world. To mention just one of many—Chris Barrett, professor of applied economics and management, is leading the current Institute for Social Sciences theme project on why some people are mired in endless poverty while others manage to escape.

In terms of our local community, the people of Cornell, year after year, contribute generously to the Tompkins County United Way, which supports 43 local agencies that serve our neighbors in need in dozens of different ways. Many of our recent graduates go immediately into organizations like the Peace Corps and Teach for America. Since the Peace Corps's founding in 1961, some 650 Cornell alumni have served in its ranks.

Finally, let me share just one example of the inspiring work that some of our alumni are doing: Roger Ellis '73, DVM '77, a volunteer with the project Farmer-to-Farmer, recently spent three weeks in rural Russia, training local veterinarians in surgical techniques and cattle breeding methods, so as to improve their dairy industry. This was Roger Ellis's eighth assignment with Farmer-to-Farmer, including several other trips to Russia as well as service in Honduras and Ethiopia.

How does someone with a multitude of personal concerns—a job or academic studies to perform; relationships to attend to, support, and enjoy; children or parents to take care of; perhaps issues of health or fitness—how does a busy person also have time to be a truly engaged citizen? We might take an idea from the September theme of the Sage Chapel Mid-day Programs—Mahatma Gandhi's famous statement, “You must be the change you want to see in the world.”

To “be the change” is to so internalize the need you see in the world, that to struggle for change is simply a natural outgrowth of who you are. The particular need that is most powerfully seen and felt will vary from person to person. But there is a role for all of us, and it is a role that each of us must carve out for himself or herself.

Here in the busy life of this educational community, we all have limited time. But higher education gives us the tools we need to be citizens who are not just engaged but engaged wisely and effectively. The university offers a wealth of knowledge, theoretical and practical. It immerses us in a diverse community drawn from every state and about 120 countries. It exposes us to new ideas; it introduces us to people who are doing things we admire and care about. This is true not just for students but also for faculty and staff and others in the community who have contact with the university.

Our challenge—the challenge for each of us—is to integrate the gifts of higher education into ourselves—and by doing so, to engage more fully with the world around us—to “be the change” we want to see in the world.

## Higher Education and Community Service

*By State Senator Kenneth P. LaValle*

Throughout my life, I have been inspired by those who unselfishly volunteer their time and talents to help a neighbor in need or better their community. Whether it was my own mother volunteering at our local hospital or a community member racing off in the night to fight a fire, I realized early on the invaluable role volunteers play throughout our nation. In New York State, in particular, volunteers staff most rural and suburban fire departments, they provide emergency medical services, they extend themselves to their schools and religious organizations, they work to protect our environment, and contribute their time and talents to one or more of the many charitable organizations that serve their communities and beyond.

As a strong advocate of community service in our schools, it is encouraging to see the recent national spotlight on service to our nation and local communities. In my role as Chairman of the New York State Senate Higher

Education Committee, I have continually supported efforts to link postsecondary education and community service as an opportunity to increase the state's volunteer base. College students across New York State volunteer thousands of hours each year in clubs and activities that support their campus, local community, the state, nation, and even the world.

For over ten years, I have sponsored legislation to encourage students who receive state funding, or attend institutions that receive state aid, to volunteer during or after their postsecondary education experience. The proposed legislation also creates low-interest loans for students who engage in community service. In addition, the Senate Majority Conference sponsored the Student Tuition Relief Initiative for a Valued Education (STRIVE) program in 2008, which would provide much-needed financial aid to New York State college students who volunteer their services.

There is a need for additional service in communities across New York State, and everyone stands to benefit from engaging New York's college students in volunteerism. As a member of the New York State Commission on National and Community Service, I applaud the efforts of the Commission to promote volunteerism and identify volunteer opportunities throughout the State, including on the campuses of our higher education institutions.

One of America's most valuable assets is its volunteers. With the national focus on volunteerism, it's prime time to encourage students to consider community service. It is my hope that the higher education connection will instill a sense of community and commitment that will inspire students to continue contributing their time and talents beyond their college years for the betterment of our society.

