

Alvernia University
Service and Civic Engagement Strategic Plan
2013-2018

Statement of Purpose:

The values of *service, humility, peacemaking, contemplation, and collegiality* have driven the mission of Alvernia from its inception. They constitute the foundation for Alvernia's commitment to both service and civic engagement. This detailed vision supports both the university's mission to nurture "broadly educated, life-long learners; reflective professionals and engaged citizens; and ethical leaders with moral courage" and its ambition to employ the university's human, intellectual, economic and spiritual resources, to promote civic dialogue and improve the well-being of the broader community.

Service

Long before the idea of community engagement became fashionable in private colleges and universities, Alvernia instituted a service requirement for all undergraduate students. Since 1991 every freshman entering Alvernia was required to complete forty hours of service in order to graduate. An early *Community Service Handbook* reminded students that:

Alvernia College, as a Catholic, Franciscan institution is part of an enduring tradition of service to the needy and action for peace and justice. As members of this community, you participate in that tradition. It is the community's hope that the service you render during your college career will become a point of light for yourself and others.

That ambition continues to have resonance. In 2008, Alvernia was recognized for its commitment to service by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching by being classified as a "Community Engagement" institution. In 2011-2012, Alvernia students completed over 22,000 hours of service. In 2012, Alvernia was invited to be a lead institution in the Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (CLDE) initiative of NASPA – Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Alvernia was invited to make a presentation at the inaugural CLDE Conference, with a related article in NASPA's *Leadership Exchange* magazine, in summer, 2013.

At Alvernia, service takes many forms and involves the entire community, from undergraduate and graduate and adult students to faculty and staff. Students take part in four organized university-wide Days of Service (Orientation, St. Francis, Martin Luther King and Earth Day), and a service activity is scheduled monthly for students to provide assistance to local community partners. Athletic teams and student organizations regularly volunteer with community groups. In 2012, the university sponsored seven alternative break programs in Reading, Washington, D.C., New Jersey, Florida, West Virginia and

Tennessee. A number of students, faculty and staff have worked with the Bernardine Sisters in developing a multi-faceted program of learning and service called *Vaya Con Dios* in the Dominican Republic. And community service is a key element of Alvernia's Leadership Berks program. This commitment to service also penetrates Alvernia's classrooms in the form of service learning classes, in which service experiences are incorporated into course requirements.

Engaging in these acts of service enriches Alvernia's students, faculty and staff as individuals, as well as the community as a whole. Studies link student volunteerism to higher graduation rates, skill acquisition and self-esteem. Participating in voluntary service enables Alvernians to grow as individuals in many ways, and leads them to live fuller, more positive lives. The value of service comes from the fact that it is inescapably spiritual and personal, generating benefits both for the individual contributing the service and for our society. We volunteer to feed the hungry, heal the sick and act as environmental stewards because we have a spiritual calling to love our neighbor and serve those that need our help.

But service is not just good in its own right; it is a way for the university to engage with civil society. Creating a culture of service among our undergraduates establishes a pattern for life. It is a foundation of modern Catholic social teaching that "people have a right and a duty to participate in society, seeking together the common good and well-being of all." Service is thus a key element in Alvernia's vision for civic engagement.

Civic Engagement

"Civic engagement means working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and nonpolitical processes." *A Crucible Moment: College Learning & Democracy's Future*, The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, American Association of Colleges and Universities.

Alvernia was founded by the Bernardine Franciscan sisters, whose values and actions have guided the growth of an institution committed to "academic excellence and to being and fostering broadly educated, life-long learners; reflective professionals and engaged citizens; and ethical leaders with moral courage." This mission is further supported by Catholic Social Teaching. *Caritas in Veritate* talks about the need for Christians to pursue the common good:

The more we strive to secure a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbors, the more effectively we love them. Every Christian is called to practice this charity, in a manner corresponding to his vocation and according to the degree of influence he wields in the polis.

John Dewey was among the first to articulate civic engagement as one of the core objectives of a liberal arts education. Dewey made the argument that the purpose of education was not only to provide knowledge in certain subjects and to prepare for a career, but schools also served as a place to

learn how to live in society. For Dewey, the purpose of education did not revolve around the acquisition of a set of knowledge or skills, but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good. What Dewey expressed in the context of modern American higher education is echoed in the motto of Alvernia: "To learn, to love, to serve." And in turn, that phrase embodies a long tradition of Franciscan Catholic education, predicated on the balancing of respect for the individual and justice for the community.

While a significant number of colleges and universities voice a commitment to civic engagement, much of what they have actually put into place is an emphasis on community service and service learning for undergraduate students. Alvernia shares this dedication to service. But, in addition, as an institution, Alvernia appreciates that true dedication to civic engagement extends beyond community service and service learning and is not limited to undergraduate education.

Some institutions define civic engagement as a set or range of specific activities, such as registering to vote, serving at a soup kitchen or participating in a campus organization. Understanding the true value of acts of service, however, requires an intellectual framework that is often missing. Speaking to the 2003 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Colleges and Universities, Ellen Condliffe Lagemann noted:

The word *vocation* implies more than earning a living or having a career. The word vocation implies having a calling: knowing who one is, what one believes, what one values, and where one stands in the world. . . Vocation is not simply about an individual calling. It is also about one's calling within one's society and, increasingly, across different societies around the world.

Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, Charles Warren Professor of the History of American Education, Harvard University.

Alvernia's comprehensive vision for civic engagement creates an intellectual framework which articulates the spiritual, individual and societal value of civic acts consistent with our mission and identity as a Franciscan Institution. Through this strategy, the University affirms that Alvernians are called to serve and to be "ethical leaders with moral courage."

Ultimately, civic engagement is grounded in our shared faith in democracy. David Mathews, President of the Kettering Foundation, describes democracy as depending on an ecosystem, not only of legislative bodies and executive agencies, but also of civic alliances, social norms, and deliberative practices that empower people to work together. The goal then of civic engagement is to promote a culture that values and encourages participation in democratic society.

As a Catholic Institution, the social teachings of the church provide the foundation for this mission. Our commitment to civic engagement was further explicated by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops in their 2007 statement "Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship":

In the Catholic Tradition, responsible citizenship is a virtue, and participation in political life is a moral obligation. This obligation is rooted in our baptismal commitment to follow Jesus Christ and to bear Christian witness in all we do. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church reminds us, 'It is necessary that all participate, each according to his position and role, in promoting the

common good. This obligation is inherent in the dignity of the human person. . . . As far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life’.

Much, but not all, of the focus of collegiate civic engagement has been on the undergraduate experience. But some institutions have extended the concept of civic engagement to include faculty and graduate community-based research. Others have extended the concept of civic engagement to include the institution itself, articulating the concept that colleges and universities have a social responsibility to engage in the communities in which they are located.

Finally, as suggested in and paraphrased from “Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place,” a strategy for civic engagement should be intentional, integrated, interactive and mutually beneficial.

- Intentional: Fostering civic engagement and encouraging the university and the university community to accept and exert its role in the broader community is an expressed ambition of the institution.
- Integrated: Engagement permeates the institution, and is integrated into its policies, programs and priorities.
- Interactive: Civic engagement implies action in concert with the broader community. For students, faculty and staff, this means actively participating in the life of the university and the community. For the university, it means occupying the role of learner as well as teacher. And for community partners it means looking to the university as a resource, not necessarily as “the answer.”
- Mutually Beneficial: Engagement should benefit all of the parties involved. An engaged institution should be responsive to community needs in ways that are appropriate to the institution’s mission and academic strengths, while building greater public understanding of the role of the campus as a community resource.

Alvernia already has established a strong foundation of support for a civic engagement strategy. It has established two strategic centers which at their core focus on community and civic engagement: The Holleran Center for Community Engagement and the O’Pake Institute for Ethics, Leadership and Public Service. These two centers form the cornerstone of Alvernia’s Strategic Plan for Service and Civic Engagement, and help the institution guide its many efforts that impact the community. Other segments of the university have also been actively involved in establishing a foundation for this strategy. For example, the University hosts a very successful community leadership development program, Leadership Berks, which in turn has helped to launch a leadership development program for diverse members of the community, Blueprint for Leadership. Operating in partnership with the O’Pake Institute, Leadership Berks, boasting over 750 graduates and serves as the premier source for nonprofit leadership and board education in the Greater Reading area. Each Leadership Berks cohort participates in a service learning project with a community-based organization and graduates go on to serve on the governing boards of area organizations.

In addition to the focus on service as described above, Alvernia has made substantial commitments in the areas of ethics and leadership which influence this strategy for civic engagement. Alvernia requires every student to take a course in ethics as a part of their degree program. The university has also implemented both academic and co-curricular programs on leadership, making the case that moral

leadership can both be taught and be learned. In addition, Alvernia has implemented a progressive leadership model in both athletics and student affairs, which encourages the development of engaged students with strong leadership skills. Every incoming freshman at Alvernia begins his or her university experience in First Year Seminar, which utilizes a common reading and a service project to link service, civic engagement and social justice to their learning experience.

In its Vision Statement, the university emphasizes four types of learning, each of which supports the principles of civic engagement:

- Integrated Learning — combining liberal arts and professional education and blending rigorous inquiry, practical experience, and personal reflection in the classroom, on campus, and in society;
- Community-Based Learning — engaging the local, regional and global communities as partners in education and service;
- Inclusive Learning — welcoming people of diverse beliefs and backgrounds; responsive to the educational needs of recent high school graduates, working adults, established professionals, and senior citizens; respectful and self-critical in our dialogue about differences in values and perspectives; and
- Ethical Learning — challenging individuals to be values-based leaders by developing habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of the soul.

It is in this context that Alvernia seeks to develop and implement a Strategic Plan for Service and Civic Engagement. The plan that follows focuses on six aspects of service and civic engagement: service to others, citizenship, social responsibility, moral leadership, dialogue and community development. These “pillars” obviously have a symbiotic relationship with each other, creating the fabric that informs a culture of service and civic engagement at the university. The various divisions of the university will incorporate these concepts into their strategic planning and will identify initiatives and programs that will support this vision.

Pillars of Service and Civic Engagement

Service to Others

Service is already a core value at Alvernia. As a Franciscan institution, Alvernia University puts special emphasis on the relational aspect of service through a calling to serve others, particularly those in need. Alvernia enhances the experience of service by having students participate in activities and discussions to reflect on the ethical and spiritual value of service. This reflection contextualizes the service experience for students and helps them understand the moral and social dimensions of serving others.

The role of the university is to not only promote the value of service, but to assist students and indeed the broader community, to learn from service to others. Thus, students have the opportunity to participate in a wide variety of service opportunities on campus, in the community and throughout the world, often joined by faculty and staff. As an institution, the university recognizes its responsibility to

serve others, particularly those less fortunate and communities in need. This culture of service is a defining characteristic of Alvernia.

Over the next two years Alvernia will:

- Expand Service-Learning opportunities and attempt to offer Service-Learning courses in every discipline; **Holleran Center(HCCE)**
- Expand South Reading Youth Initiative and Alvernia READS programming to serve more children; **HCCE** and **Education Department**

Over the ensuing three years, Alvernia will:

- Amend the service requirement for student graduation to better reflect the University's commitment to community service; **HCCE** and **Arts and Sciences**
- Expand the array of community service opportunities for students nationally and internationally. **University Life** and **Art and Sciences**

Citizenship

Participation in civil society requires an educated and informed citizenry. Alvernia educates students about the roles, rights and responsibilities of citizenship and offer opportunities for students to participate in government, politics and civil institutions. For example, during the 2012 election cycle, Alvernia actively encouraged students to register to vote and participate in the electoral process, and hosted a candidate debate for state legislative offices. It has sponsored students to attend national political conventions and the Presidential Inauguration. Each year, students from a wide array of academic disciplines enroll in programs with The Washington Center, which offers both academic programming and internship opportunities in the nation's capital.

Citizenship indicates that one belongs to a community. Today's students will be working in a global economy will be living in increasingly diverse places and will be part of a global workforce. Electronic communications and the ease of travel have broken down traditional barriers that isolated groups from each other, and give new meaning to the concept of citizenship and belonging to a community. Alvernia must prepare its students to thrive in that new world.

In addition to developing our undergraduate students as engaged citizens, the university recognizes that our faculty, staff and adult students should also be encouraged to be active members not only of the Alvernia community, but the broader community as well.

Over the next two years, Alvernia will:

- Sponsor an annual O'Pake Lecture which will focus on issues related to ethics, leadership and public service, such as citizenship, civility and compromise: **O'Pake Institute**
- Explore the creation of an academic minor in Humanitarian Aid, Community Service or Public Service; **Arts and Sciences, HCCE and O'Pake Institute**
- Support the "Leaders, Legends and Visionaries Series": **Leadership Berks**

Over the ensuing three years, Alvernia will:

- Identify and create incentives to encourage every undergraduate student to participate in an internship, research project or study abroad opportunity. **University led by Academic Affairs and University Life**
- Establish a repository of state polling data on issues related to ethics, leadership and public service. **O’Pake Institute**

Social Responsibility

Catholic Social Teaching holds that “We have to move from our devotion to independence, through an understanding of interdependence, to a commitment to human solidarity. That challenge must find its realization in the kind of community we build among us.” (“Economic Justice for All,” Pastoral Letter of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1986.)

In some cases, we define community by the places where we live. At other times, community is defined by our associations and affiliations, say to a religion, a team or a professional society. In some cases our communities can be virtual. Regardless of the form that they take, healthy communities are bound together by certain shared beliefs and values, such as tolerance and respect for others. Living in a community brings with it the responsibility to participate in that community, to abide by its principles, to steward its resources and to reflect its values. Alvernia as an institution must thus itself act to promote healthier communities and work for social justice.

Over the next two years, Alvernia will:

- Foster the concepts of environmental stewardship and sustainability in the operations of the university and into University curricular activities, and more broadly in the community; **Facilities, HCCE and Arts and Sciences supported by the University Leadership**
- Launch the Interfaith Alternative Break program; **Campus Ministry/University Life**
- Under the auspices of a NetVUE grant, offer faculty workshops to help incorporate the concept of vocation and calling into the curriculum; **Mission**

Over the ensuing three years, Alvernia will:

- Pursue additional funding to support the incorporation of the concepts of vocation and calling into the curriculum; **Mission**
- Create a repository of syllabi on ethics in the undergraduate curriculum and hold an annual symposium/faculty workshop for Franciscan University faculty on teaching ethics to undergraduates. **O’Pake Institute**

Moral Leadership

Requiring every student to take at least one course in ethics emphasizes the importance of ethics and moral character development. By offering degree programs in leadership, Alvernia demonstrates its belief that leadership can, in fact, be taught, and that developing leadership skills can be an intentional part of higher education. Through its commitment to service and leadership, Alvernia develops moral leaders who can use their talents and skills to promote social justice through engagement with the broader community.

Over the next two years Alvernia will:

- Conduct an inventory of academic and university life programming related to leadership education and development and sponsor a campus workshop on leadership: ***O’Pake Institute in conjunction with Leadership PhD program and GECCCO.***
- Implement academic programming to support the proposed General Education focus area that would allow students to take six credit hours related to Ethical Leaders and Followers to fulfill a general education requirement: ***GECCO***
- Launch a Master’s Degree program in Organizational Leadership. ***Provost***

Over the ensuing three years, Alvernia will:

- Establish a Leadership Academy linking all of the leadership development courses, certificates and degrees into a single interdisciplinary entity collaborating with the O’Pake Institute; ***O’Pake Institute, University Life, Enrollment Management and Provost***
- Ensure the future success of the Blueprint for Leadership program by increasing support for the program and strengthening the linkages to Leadership Berks and the University: ***Leadership Berks and O’Pake Institute***

Dialogue

The purpose of a liberal arts education is not just to train students for a career, but also to inspire students with a sense of civic responsibility and to help them develop innovative tools and strategies for addressing contemporary problems. The university itself is the perfect agent for fostering dialogue on community issues. The basic purpose of dialogue is to bring people together to discuss important issues and provide an opportunity to air their differences. Dialogue implies discernment of the differences between individuals, groups and communities. It requires reflection on important issues and the nature of controversy. Dialogue encourages an appreciation of diversity and social justice. It implies a level of civility and an interest in listening that that allows for meaningful discussion. And it suggests a willingness to share not only ideas but power. Dialogue requires that participants and listeners work together to find mutually acceptable solutions to areas of concern.

Over the next two years Alvernia will:

- Create a Community Dialogue Program focused on important local and regional issues; ***O’Pake Institute***
- Expand our curricular and co—curricular programs on Cross Cultural Education and Training. ***Arts and Sciences, Professional Programs and University Life***
- Implement an Interfaith Dialogue Initiative including student activities, coursework and community events. ***Campus Ministry and HCCE***
- Create a Mediation Training program that leads to a certificate. ***Graduate and Continuing Education, Professional Programs, O’Pake Institute***

Over the ensuing three years, Alvernia will:

- Implement a Conflict Resolution Training Program for students, faculty and staff; ***University led by Academic Affairs and University Life***

- Explore the possibility of establishing a mediation center. **Graduate and Continuing Education, Professional Programs and O’Pake Institute**

Community Development

A growing number of universities are dedicating their resources to support their surrounding communities, applying their economic power and their human and intellectual resources to benefit the community in which it resides.

Alvernia plays a significant role in fostering community development in several different ways. It facilitates public deliberation on important policy issues. It brings stakeholders together to identify and act on problems in the community. It sponsors research-based community development activities and replicates best practices from other communities. It develops the metrics for evaluating the success of a program or initiative. It engages other academic institutions both within and outside the region on significant social issues. It use its resources, including its purchasing power, to strengthen the community. It creates capacity within the non-profit and government sectors to address social issues. It helps train emerging leaders. It promotes small business development and social entrepreneurship. Alvernia offers these services not only to those communities where its campuses are located, but regionally and globally as well.

Over the next two years, Alvernia will:

- Establish a Reading Collegiate Scholars Program; **HCCE, O’Pake Institute and Admissions**
- Host a series of symposia for community leaders on community development, focusing on successes in other Pennsylvania cities, anchor institutions and strategic partnerships; **O’Pake Institute**
- Complete initial Berks County Vital Signs report for the Berks County Community Foundation, conduct follow-up educational programs and supplemental reports: **O’Pake Institute and Leadership PhD program**
- Explore the development of a program that would use the resources of the university to address gaps in the delivery of health care services in the Oakbrook Housing Project; **O’Pake Institute and Professional Programs**

Over the ensuing three years, Alvernia will:

- Implement a Leadership Berks style program for Alvernia faculty and staff to expand their involvement with non-profit community based organizations. **Leadership Berks**
- Explore opportunities for the university to use its strategic assets and explore partnerships and other collaborative opportunities with other community institutions to support community revitalization and redevelopment efforts; **O’Pake Institute, Leadership PhD program**
- Explore the feasibility of and begin to plan the development of a Family Center in a Public Housing Development in Reading. **O’Pake, Professional Programs and Graduate and Continuing Education.**
- Expand the capacity of the university to support community based research. **O’Pake Institute, Leadership PhD program, HCCE and Academic Affairs**

Conclusion

Continuing to develop an intentional and integrated focus on these pillars of service and civic engagement will enable Alvernia to not only prepare students for careers, but also to be engaged civic leaders and citizens. The commitment to this strategy will brand Alvernia as a leader in service and civic engagement regionally and nationally. It is not enough to be wise stewards of these values; a commitment to service and civic engagement requires participation and action. This commitment will help Alvernia realize its mission as a “rigorous, caring, and inclusive learning community committed to academic excellence and to being and fostering broadly educated, life-long learners; reflective professionals and engaged citizens; and ethical leaders with moral courage.”

The Divisions of the University will incorporate these concepts into their strategic plans and their work objectives, developing strategies, initiatives and programs to support this vision.

Notes on sources: Over the past two decades, there have been many reports focusing on higher education and civic engagement which provide both background and initiatives on civic engagement in the university. These include: “Returning to Our Roots: The Engaged University” (Kellogg Commission on the Future of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges, 2001); “Stepping Forward as Stewards of Place” (American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 2002) and “A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future” (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, U.S. Department of Education, 2012).