

# Generating Discipline-Based Community Impact through Academic and Student Affairs Collaboration

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**This paper examines the sustained regional community engagement of the Department of Architecture and Design and elaborates on the enhanced impact realized through collaboration with a student affairs civic leadership initiative. Analysis of the case study examples illustrates best practices and a pathway to collaboration on course design, creative cooperation, and intentional partnership designed to maximize student learning and community impact.**

## **PROJECT BASED LEARNING & CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

Alfred State's mission is to provide career-focused education enriched by the liberal arts to produce job- and transfer-ready graduates. This is accomplished through baccalaureate and associate degree programs that align with workforce needs. Project-based learning is a cornerstone of the College's approach and is fostered by a campus culture of learning by doing. In a recent survey, 99 percent of Alfred State graduates either gained employment or transferred in pursuit of four-year or graduate degrees. Of those students entering the workforce, 91 percent started careers in their chosen field. The College's high placement rate is a direct result of hands-on learning in high demand programs.

Alfred State prioritizes community engagement leveraging the unique skill sets of technology-oriented students to collaboratively address community needs. This is implemented through project-based learning in the curriculum as well as civic leadership opportunities in the co-curriculum.

The Center for Civic Engagement provides dedicated infrastructure and leadership to civic initiatives. The mission of the center is to promote a culture of civic engagement preparing students for leadership in their community. Working together with community, faculty/staff, and students, the center facilitates opportunities to bring learning to life while impacting communities in a positive way. The vision of the center is to make civic engagement a core element of the student experience across curricular and co-curricular programs with graduates fully prepared to be civic leaders.

Alfred State's Faculty Senate took the lead in 2013 to develop an institution-wide definition of civic engagement designed as a starting point

for course designation, awards, and other key pathways for campus civic engagement. The formal definition highlighted civic engagement as a problem solving approach emphasizing critical thinking, collaborative action, and meaningful reflection with a particular focus on understanding the root causes of community challenges. The definition also outlined that anticipated outcomes would result in individual transformation, societal change, and graduates who are engaged citizens in their community.

Signature partnerships form the platform for project-based community engagement efforts across multiple disciplines. For example, a new collaboration between the Allegany County Board of Legislators Planning and Economic Development Committee and Alfred State is focused on implementing an economic and industrial development program to attract businesses to the county and promote the expansion of existing industries. These types of capacity building activities are the backbone of civic engagement within an underserved region. Students studying Business Administration, Architecture, Human Service Management, Building Trades, and many other majors all can contribute meaningfully through partnerships like these designed to advance student learning while delivering community benefit.

## **COMMUNITY CHALLENGES**

Alfred State is located in Allegany County – a county with a population of 48,000 and ranked as the second poorest in New York State. The median income for a household is around \$42,776, 16.8 percent of the county population live below the poverty line, and the per capita income is \$20,940. With federal and state cutbacks in social spending, the need for services in the county continues to climb. Given these substantive challenges, the College's human, intellectual, and financial capital make its location strategically vital to the region's social and economic infrastructure.

Area communities in Allegany and surrounding counties are rich in history and natural beauty, but tend to have both limited resources and part-time governments. They also face a number of issues that threaten the character, livability, and economic health of the entire region. These concerns include affordable housing, historic preservation, and cost-effective improvements to existing neighborhoods and business districts. Municipalities often need assistance with long-range planning to create



Figure 1: Leadership Suites in the Student Leadership Center. Photo courtesy of William Rawn Associates.

a vision for future sustainability. Without this assistance, communities have a difficult time creating documentation to assist them in obtaining grant funding for large- and small-scale projects. This has provided a unique opportunity for the development of an academic center that offers real solutions to the challenges facing New York's Southern Tier.

#### **ACADEMIC AFFAIRS PARTNER: DEPARTMENT OF ARCHITECTURE AND DESIGN**

For over 14 years, students in the Architecture and Interior Design programs have participated in community-based civic engagement projects throughout Western New York as part of their studio coursework. For example, the fourth-year Urban Design Studio has focused on the study of local and regional issues related to urban, suburban, and rural design problems and on seeking sustainable solutions through public interest design. Since 2003, the studio has collaborated with the American Institute of Architects Rochester Chapter and the Community Design Center of Rochester, both of which support the idea of civic engagement and student participation in community design projects. The studio's primary purpose is to help communities visualize potential options for revitalizing their neighborhoods and business districts.

While this studio has typically concluded its work at the end of the fall semester, a turning point came when one civic partner asked that discussions continue regarding ways in which students could assist them in turning one of the previous semester's proposed visions into reality. The goal was to use that first project to build relationships among a variety of unrelated community groups as a catalyst for further development. The project generated a great deal of positive media attention for Alfred State and its Architecture program – an unintended benefit that prompted discussion about establishing a student-run center on campus to oversee similar community design projects. These discussions ultimately led to the proposal and launching of the Southern Tier Architectural Resource Center.

#### **STUDENT AFFAIRS PARTNER: CENTER FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT**

The Center for Civic Engagement serves as a catalyst and facilitator of ideas and action designed to address community challenges and

enhance student learning. The Center also supports institution-wide initiatives such as the Student Leadership Center (SLC) and Leadership Suite initiative designed to develop graduates who are not only equipped to excel in the workforce, but also to demonstrate ethical leadership and a commitment to civic engagement. When funds became available for a student union, key institutional leaders led the way in reimagining a center that is not only a hub for student activities, but a nexus for leadership training and active civic engagement. A generic student commons building concept was transformed into the Student Leadership Center.

Leadership Suites are the signature spatial and programmatic element of the SLC dedicated to inspiring student civic engagement and leadership development. These suites are a critical component of the center's design and operate similarly to storefronts where civic engagement is openly marketed and active community involvement is modeled.

The purpose of Leadership Suites is to provide a clear pathway for uninvolved students to encounter civically engaged students, witness a diversity of causes and projects, and be inspired to involvement. It reflects an "in your face" flavor of student engagement in which students are confronted with opportunities to become a part of the solution to community challenges. These thirteen suites are centrally and prominently located within the social hub of the SLC adjacent to a common area where students congregate, have coffee or meals, and study. Suites have a transparent glass wall to help with marketing their social cause by facilitating signage displays, information, and other artifacts. Each suite is also equipped with digital signage that students can utilize to share pictures, video, social media feeds, and other tools to promote their respective civic cause.

Leadership Suites are awarded through a competitive process. Any student co-curricular and curricular organization may apply by submitting a robust business plan that outlines their social enterprise, how it addresses a community challenge, and their strategy to get other student involved. Student applications are evaluated by the Leadership Advisory Board, a group of staff, faculty, and students that review and make recommendations on approval based on the following key elements: community partnership, engaging uninvolved students, ethical decision-making, impact, leadership development, sustainability, and organizational capacity. The Vice President of Student Affairs finalizes approval of student groups awarded this honor enhancing the prestige and recognition provided to these civically involved groups.

Organizations awarded a Leadership Suite receive a two year 'lease' on the space contingent on meeting the expectations related to their group's mission. These expectations include having the space staffed for at least 25 hours/week, meeting the civic goals outlined in their application, attending training opportunities, and demonstrating measurable progress in inspiring uninvolved students to get involved in their enterprise.

The student learning outcomes for this effort were informed by the work conducted by organizations such as the American Association of Colleges and Universities Civic Engagement VALUE rubric and the Council for the Advancement of Standards Learning and Developmental Outcomes. These student learning outcomes include:

- Inspire active community engagement by unaffiliated and uninvolved students enhancing a culture of civic engagement on campus.
- Collaborate with a community partner to actively and intentionally identify and address an issue of public concern.
- Build high level leadership and marketplace skills in the areas of verbal communication, team work, and problem solving.
- Encourage collaboration of student groups and academic disciplines to address community challenges.

Assessment of these learning outcomes are a fundamental element of the program. Surveys are conducted each semester to measure progress. The data gathered is focused on the activity or events sponsored or initiated by the suite so that key data associated with philanthropic fundraising, community service hours, community education events, advocacy activities, and other indicators of civic inputs may be tracked. These surveys demonstrate that student organizations that participate in the Leadership Suite initiative achieve the following:

- Significant measurable civic inputs and outcomes are generated
- Student groups grow stronger organizationally in size and leadership
- Students indicate enhanced appreciation of collaboration with community partner (s)
- Enhanced opportunities to work with other student groups
- Students utilize important skills as they market and promote their cause, lead presentations, and attend leadership development and civic training

The suites operate as social innovation incubators fostering collaboration and new ideas as student organizations across campus compete for these coveted spaces and implement their vision. Their physical placement illustrates a belief that strategically-placed workspaces can be leveraged to build civic capacity and engagement through partnerships with community organizations and other stakeholders within the campus. This initiative is “moving the needle” in building a culture of civic engagement at Alfred State and has provided a platform for collaboration with the students in the Department of Architecture and Design.

#### **COLLABORATIVE INITIATIVE: SOUTHERN TIER ARCHITECTURAL RESOURCE CENTER**

The Southern Tier Architectural Resource Center (STAR Center) is a collaboration of three student organizations in the Department of Architecture and Design that are working together to improve life in the communities around Alfred State. These organizations include members of the Architecture, Interior Design, and Women in Non-traditional Studies Clubs. Other interested students on campus, and faculty advisors have also become a valuable resource for those in need of design assistance.

The establishment of the STAR Center was the first step in consolidating, formalizing and extending the efforts of the individual architecture and

interior design studios at Alfred State for the benefit of Allegany County and the surrounding region. Through the work of the club members and faculty advisors, the center strives to educate and assist individuals, civic and community groups, and municipalities by offering a combination of applied, participatory research, education, advocacy, and technical expertise.

The STAR Center’s mission is to enhance the quality of the built environment in Allegany County through the promotion of sound design and planning principles. The center’s vision is a Southern Tier where the application and implementation of these principles can assist in creating vibrant, economically healthy and sustainable communities. The goals of the center include:

- Supporting and expanding on the outreach and civic engagement initiatives of students and faculty in the department with a concentration on historic preservation and urban design challenges facing local communities. This has been achieved by initiating, and coordinating applied, participatory research projects for not-for-profit community groups and non-profit civic organizations on both a short- and long-term basis.
- Promoting architectural education at different levels throughout the region. In addition to educating Alfred State students through civic engagement opportunities, the center is developing programs to increase public awareness of architecture and design, and creating architectural awareness programs for youths in grades K-12.
- Offering education, advocacy and technical design and planning expertise to public groups and organizations seeking to create more livable communities. When appropriate, the center works in cooperation with other design professionals, professional organizations, community groups and educational institutions to advocate for good design in the built environment.
- Providing focused leadership development opportunities at all levels of the organization and within the structure of each project to complement previously completed training at the college. Students gain experience in both leadership and teamwork, much as they would experience working on a project in an office environment.

The establishment of the STAR Center has benefited students, residents, and communities in and around Allegany County as illustrated in the following examples.

#### **COMMUNITY OUTCOMES: STAR CENTER CASE EXAMPLES**

Pioneer Park Cemetery, Dansville, NY – Early in 2014, the Dansville Area Historical Society contacted Alfred State to see if there were any students interested in exploring design solutions for “The Old Burying Ground,” a former cemetery in a local community. While the 19th Century cemetery had been used as a village green for some time, the remains of at least 20 persons were thought to still be buried in the plot of land now known as Pioneer Park. The Pioneer Park Committee had previously worked with a group of students from Ithaca College doing ground penetrating radar testing, had a great deal of information on the history of the area, and had raised the money for a monument to be located somewhere in





Figure 2: Students Andrew Scott and Jeremy Dearing meet with members of the Pioneer Park Committee in the STAR Center.

the park. They were eager to enlist the assistance of architecture students to explore conceptual site planning options.

Two second-year students and a faculty advisor made an initial site visit to Dansville early in the process to photographically document the park, and then worked with representatives from the village and the committee to develop two schematic design alternatives for the former cemetery. The designs were presented to the clients at a meeting in the STAR Center's Leadership Suite in April. A final conceptual plan including refined versions of each option was submitted at the end of the semester in May 2014, and the members of the committee were extremely complimentary of the students' efforts.

Following the design phase of the project, the committee weighed the attributes of each proposal and selected the option they thought most closely fit with the village's character and the funding available to complete the project. To date, the monument has been placed, and the sidewalks, benches and lighting have been installed in accordance with the students' plan. The final phase will include the placement of several picnic tables, and new landscaping between the existing parking area and the park.

Scio Memorial Library Park, Scio, NY – In October 2014, a first-year architecture student and a faculty advisor met with members of the Scio Library Committee to discuss design options for a park adjacent to the library. Students from Alfred State's School of Applied Technology in Wellsville had already been involved in clearing the library-owned site of a derelict house and leveling the property for potential new construction the previous spring.

The project team was expanded to include two third-year students, and the group began their research by making a site visit to the library to document the existing conditions. The students then collaborated to generate three different design proposals that were subsequently presented to the committee early in March 2015 at the STAR Center Leadership Suite. The committee offered their feedback and the students set to work refining their initial concepts for a second design meeting held at the library. After another round of comments, the team combined the strengths of their individual work into a final design

proposal that was presented to the Scio Library Board. Overall feedback from the committee suggested that they found the process educational, and that the students helped them visualize potential options. The work confirmed their desire for design elements and site features such as a gazebo moved to a central spot in the park, and a defined area for plantings and walkways.

To date, the committee has obtained six benches that were assembled and positioned in Spring 2016. In anticipation of additional construction, a great deal of brush was removed from the back of the lot, a contractor was hired to move the gazebo and the storage shed, and another contractor hired to repair and re-shingle the gazebo roof. While the park is far from finished, it has already hosted an open house fundraiser in the gazebo, and a visit from 'Santa Claus' when the library held a holiday event there. Challenges remain in implementing some of the costlier design features, yet the committee feels that they have a plan that can help them move forward. They have also been encouraged by the reaction of the residents and local officials in terms of increased cooperation and volunteerism.

Lion's Camp Badger, Spencer, NY – The initial contact with a board member at the camp in September 2014 came through the Director of Civic Engagement at Alfred State. Camp Badger is a retreat that helps children with disabilities and gives them "A Special Camping Experience." The initial request was for the STAR Center to work with the staff at the camp to assist them with creating a master plan for the facility. As was the case with the Scio project, The School of Applied Technology's Heavy Equipment Operations class had previously been involved in helping with infrastructure improvements at the camp. The current college president had also visited the camp and was enthusiastic about the program.

In November, a faculty advisor traveled to the camp with three students to meet with the Camp Director and board members, tour the camp, and discuss ways in which the STAR Center could help with planning small-scale renovation projects. A course of action was determined and the students began developing design proposals for a new "staff hotel" at the camp. In mid-April, the students presented their preliminary design ideas to a local board member and received useful feedback regarding their work in progress. The team spent several more weeks refining their designs, and final proposals were presented to the camp's board of directors during a meeting in May 2015. The camp's architect was given access to the student designs to consider as he began his work on the project.

Each design proposal was well received and the presentation drew praise from the board members in attendance. The board eventually decided to revise the project's focus as accessible housing for children, rather than the staff hotel, since they felt it was presently more in line with the mission of the camp which was also expanding the summer camp program from two to four weeks. Since then, the STAR Center has been called upon once again to propose ways of making the camp's dining hall more accessible.

#### APPLICATION AND LESSONS LEARNED

The cooperative efforts of students and faculty in the Department of Architecture and Design's club-focused STAR Center and the Center for



Figure 3: Students Trentin Reese and Andrew Scott present their final design to members of the Scio Library Board at the Scio Memorial Library.

Civic Engagement represents a valuable example of academic and student affairs collaboration that has benefited both the students and the communities that they serve. It amplifies a cornerstone of the architectural education at Alfred State where students seek opportunities to explore their social responsibility as emerging professionals through local and global civic engagement projects in each and every design studio. Students are also presented with the opportunity to work both individually and collaboratively toward a common goal, accept and respond creatively to a variety of stakeholders, and recognize the role that local politics and activism can play in planning for community development. Participation in the STAR Center also generates progress in building a culture of civic engagement and developing civic leadership skillsets – goals that are promulgated throughout the institution, within Student Affairs programming, and specifically through the Center for Civic Engagement.

The STAR Center has occupied a Leadership Suite and has been an integral component of the SLC since its inception. Its status as a Leadership Suite has enabled the Center to take advantage of additional resources including greater access to funding sources that improve the capacity of the clubs to fulfill their mission. It has enjoyed greater visibility on campus as initiatives and accomplishments are highlighted in a prominent and central location. The physical space provides a venue to meet with community leaders and facilitate planning sessions. In addition, student development opportunities such as alumni speakers, webinars, and regular meetings build student leadership and encourage collaboration with other departments and organizations on campus. Its status as a Leadership Suite on campus has enhanced capacity to generate successful outcomes.

The types of projects undertaken by the STAR Center are diverse and offer multiple pathways to successful outcomes which are typically characterized by the following:

- A mutual respect for the community's many strengths and attributes – By completing a thorough analysis of existing conditions prior to the start of a project, students gain a solid understanding of the inherent strengths found in the community and are better prepared to respond to the weaknesses identified by stakeholders during the design process. Multiple opportunities to engage with community



Figure 4: Student Adam Johnson presents his final design for the Staff Hotel to the Lion's Camp Badger Board of Directors at their monthly meeting.

residents and municipal officials throughout a typical project, and the genuine willingness of students to learn about the community instead of charging in with potentially capricious solutions, helps to both reduce anxiety and earn credibility among community members involved.

- The enthusiasm of residents and students to participate in positive social change – These projects foster a passionate activist spirit in both the residents of a community and the participating students – a feeling that results from the realization of the good that citizens and architects can do by actively serving society. This focus on civic engagement and social responsibility is reinforced by allowing students to apply the skills they are learning through their coursework to real projects outside of the classroom setting. Along the way, students are able to hone their professional practice and communications skills at private meetings, public presentations, and at local and regional conferences.
- The level of satisfaction expressed by community stakeholders for the projects completed by the students – The students provide tangible value for the civic partner by working together with stakeholders to identify diverse design strategies custom-tailored to address the unique problems faced by each community. These projects also produce a tremendous amount of good will generated by immersing young minds into communities struggling to address a range of social and economic challenges.

As for the students involved, most come from beyond the geographic area of the Center's focus, with some hailing from other states and even other counties. They go into each project without bias or preconceived notions, and are only concerned with creating good design for the social good. Many of these dedicated students will carry the spirit of activism with them after graduation and, as engaged citizens, architects and urban designers, will seek to achieve positive change for communities wherever their futures may take them.

## CONCLUSION

An institutional commitment to civic inquiry, civic action, and civic values creates a climate in which students can apply learning to benefit the

larger community. We propose that creating a seamless environment for students across campus silos can generate a more holistic and seamless experience for students. Activities and action outside the classroom can support and enrich in-class learning while multiplying community benefits. There are many creative applications to this type of internal collaboration that can generate significant dividends in student learning and community benefit.

#### ENDNOTES

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