

# **Making a Difference: Colleges and Community Service**

By Daan Braveman

President-elect, Nazareth College

*As Published in the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle: June, 2005*

Last week, Nazareth College hosted a meeting of Community Service Directors from schools throughout the region. These individuals are responsible for directing programs that involve college students in community service projects. Through the efforts of these Directors, college students devote literally thousands of hours to public service in their local communities.

I believe it is critical that we in higher education continue to develop and expand links between our institutions and local communities, finding ways to make a difference in the lives of people throughout the area. From the community's perspective, such involvement provides obvious benefits. College students provide much-needed assistance in local schools, hospitals, nursing homes, day-care centers, and community agencies, just to name a few of the services.

Equally important, engagement with the community serves a variety of educational and institutional purposes. First, it enhances the teaching and learning that are central to our mission. Someone once said, "Tell me, I forget. Teach me, I may remember. Involve me and I learn." Community service projects create opportunities for students to get involved in the learning process, applying the material studied in the classroom to the real world. In that process, the students develop a deeper understanding of the classroom material and a greater appreciation for its practical application.

Second, community service projects expand the perspectives of the students. 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" skills. A professor at Syracuse University once observed 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.

Third, by making community service an essential part of the college experience, we instill in students a sense of civic responsibility. An understanding of the importance of civic duty-- of giving back to the community-- is a lesson that will serve students well throughout their lives, in whatever communities they might live.

Finally, colleges and universities have an institutional reason for committing to community engagement. Ernest Boyer, one of the great educators of the past decades, wrote that "what is needed for higher education is not just programs, but a larger purpose,

a larger sense of mission, a larger clarity of direction in the nation's life." Institutions of higher education have the expertise and the people power to make a difference in the larger local, regional, and national communities. We have a vital role to play in developing clarity of direction in our national life.

It was with great pleasure that we at Nazareth were able to host the conference of Community Service Directors. Nazareth has a long and impressive tradition of community engagement-- a tradition that we, together with other colleges and universities, should preserve and enhance.