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Richard Sinatra

James J. Maher

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## Advancing the Vincentian Tradition through Strategic Service and Research

Richard Sinatra and James J. Maher  
St. John's University, New York

*This article reveals how St. John's University implemented mission-focused programs to advance its unique Catholic perspective, that of the Vincentian tradition to serve the poor and remedy social inequities. Heeding the 1986 call of Pope John Paul II to Vincentian institutions, all levels of the university from incoming freshmen to the board of trustees have embraced the Pope's message to serve the poor and needy. Major program initiatives have included an expanded and enriched academic service-learning (ASL) program with a Discover New York service component for all incoming freshmen; the creation of a Vincentian Institute for Social Action to coordinate student and faculty service and research efforts with community partners; the establishment of a 4-year undergraduate Ozanam Scholar Program to engage students in extensive service and research under faculty mentorship; sustainable collaborations with community partners whose mission focus is compatible with the Vincentian perspective; and a dedicated effort to measure program impact through outcomes-based quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. Religiously affiliated institutions may find program components and organizational strategies to be beneficial in their own work in serving the poor, needy, and disenfranchised.*

**T**his article chronicles the experience of a university seeking to rekindle its unique Catholic perspective. St. John's University was founded in 1870 in Brooklyn, New York, when the Roman Catholic Bishop of Brooklyn, Bishop John Loughlin, asked the Vincentian community (the religious community founded by St. Vincent de Paul) to open a college for men in order to provide educational access to the sons of immigrants. Later, women would be admitted to the college. At its inception, St. John's was understood to be an educational institution with a specific mission—providing access and opportunity for students seeking to better their lives and the lives of their families. For some 140 years, St. John's has strived to pursue its mission of providing an education of Catholic values with opportunities to provide service for the needy in a diverse metropolitan community, while affording programs

of academic excellence befitting an institution of higher education.

With its largest campus located in Queens, New York, the university has enjoyed student populations of great ethnic, racial, and religious diversity. Moreover, 40% of the freshmen classes are Pell Grant recipients, reflecting outreach to the economically disadvantaged. With additional sites in Staten Island, Manhattan, and Long Island, and international locations in Paris and Rome, the mission of St. John's encompassed a global perspective.

### **A Challenge and Plan Formulation**

Many private religiously affiliated universities face a common challenge—the numerical diminishment of religious community members who sponsor the university as board members, university administration, and faculty. For a number of years, St. John's Board of Trustees and senior management team have been grappling with various ways to engage members of the university as agents to advance its Catholic and Vincentian mission. Accordingly, within the last decade, the university initiated an Office of Mission specifically designed to increase mission awareness and activity among employees.

The university has also struggled with an equally significant and evolving component of its mission to create focused impact on communities living in poverty. For St. John's, as a Vincentian university, this was long overdue. St. Vincent de Paul made it his aim to build bridges between educational and social service institutions and the world of the poor. At a meeting of the Vincentian community in Rome, Italy, Pope John Paul II (1986) urged Vincentians to recommit their lives and institutions to seek out the causes of poverty and develop both short- and long-term solutions. The university has taken this call to heart: "As a Catholic and Vincentian university, we will be known worldwide for addressing poverty and social justice" (St. John's University, 2001). In 2006, the Middle States Association Evaluation team challenged the university to consider a mandatory service learning experience for all its undergraduate students as a way to reinforce the Vincentian mission. The 2006–2008 Strategic Plan asked that students be provided with educational experiences that were highly Vincentian in nature while embracing service opportunities for needy metropolitan and global populations. The plan also called for the establishment of a mission-oriented agency or institute with its own staff, budget, facilities, and vision to provide community outreach while serving the six schools of the university. Other religiously affiliated institutions may find components of the plan and programs described in this paper to be beneficial

as they expand their own service and research-based projects with community agencies serving the needy and disenfranchised.

### Literature Review

The literature review focuses on the broad perspectives of (1) academic service learning; (2) faculty involvement; and (3) community partner outreach and community-based learning. Academic service learning connects course work with work or service that occurs in the community so that the learning experiences gained from service with a community agency integrates with classroom learning (Howard, 2003). Service-learning practitioners are highly aware that service learning benefits students' educational experiences while providing positive community interactions (Bloomstrom & Tam, 2008; Jeandron & Robinson, 2010). Such service-learning integration increases students' social and emotional development, their esteem of their host school, and prepares them to contribute more fully to their communities (Strage, 2004).

Faculty are key agents for academic service learning to flourish. Faculty who promote service-learning projects often assume an advocacy stance and note that their students become highly involved in course work, investigating relationships between academic content and "real-world" applications (Bacon & Sather, 2001). Moreover, academic service learning becomes possible through commitment by faculty and more meaningful with positive administrative support and connections to institutional culture (Furco, 2002; Jeandron & Robinson 2010). To enrich and sustain the efforts of academic service learning, research conducted relative to faculties' specific disciplines facilitates understanding and acceptance by community stakeholders (Bloomstrom & Tam, 2008).

The third important ingredient in the service-learning construct is the community partner. Partners need to have input into the planning and implementation of a service-learning project so that they can perceive the benefits that might accrue to the agency (Miron & Moely, 2006), and they should not assume just a variable role in the research undertaken (Henderson, Fair, Sather, & Dewey, 2008). Discussing and defining research plans needs to be done jointly by the community partner and faculty of the host institution (Sather, Carlson, & Weitz, 2007). In this way the host institution, faculty, and the community partner will develop a relationship (Ammon, Furco, Chi, & Middaugh, 2001) so that collaboration in partnership building and maintenance becomes an institutional focus (Kramer, 2000). The merging of a supportive academic

culture and faculty instructional input with a mission-oriented community partner makes for a flourishing academic service-learning environment (Zlotkowski, 1998).

A mission-oriented framework has become evident for many Catholic and Vincentian institutes of higher education as they direct their service efforts to benefit the social needs of communities in the form of community-based learning. For instance, Fordham University has established a consortium for social justice; Catholic University, a center for community development and social justice; Georgetown University, a center for social concerns; Villanova University, a sophomore service-learning community; and Notre Dame, a social concerns center, which offers credit-bearing programs during semester breaks and summer to benefit partner agencies.

Three other Vincentian-sponsored institutions promote experiential community-based learning. Under its Learn and Serve program, Niagara University offers courses with service-learning components in every college and in nearly all academic departments to promote experiential learning with communities serving the marginalized and the poor. Adamson University encourages its students to participate in social action with community organizations under its integrated Community Extension Services program. The Irwin W. Stearns Center for community-based service learning at DePaul University provides multiple opportunities and experiences for students to work on societal issues and engage in community service in the form of internships, scholarships, research, and community-based student employment. Additionally, DePaul offers a community service studies minor that combines course work from several disciplines and integrates community-based service learning.

### **The Vincentian Institute for Social Action**

In January 2008, St. John's formed the Vincentian Institute for Social Action, which sought to amplify and strengthen the university's academic service-learning focus, and, more importantly, structured new programs that mirrored the community-based learning approaches offered by fellow Catholic and Vincentian universities. The institute's goal was to integrate scholarly work with the needs of community agencies in a mentoring, research-focused, community service framework that would achieve action with measurable impact. University resources were committed to support the full efforts and vision of the institute. For instance, approximately \$1.5 million of the university's internal resources during fiscal year 2010 were allocated to the institute's pro-

grams. Funds were used for institute staffing; the Ozanam Scholars Program; academic service learning; the Faculty Research Consortium (FRC); student retreats; conference presentations; international service; community service materials; and additional program costs.

### Academic Service Learning

Academic service learning (AS-L) slowly began to flourish during the late 1990's when two Vincentian priests, Fr. Richard Devine, C.M., and Fr. Stephen Bicsko, C.M., influenced by the teachings and writings of Zlotkowski (1996, 1998) saw such service as a way to actively enhance the Vincentian call to mission. Faculty from various departments of the six colleges/schools increasingly joined in to advance the AS-L construct with local community agencies serving needy populations. In 2008, the office and functions of AS-L were subsumed as a component of the Vincentian Institute for Social Action. With this organizational structure, the university's commitment to social justice issues tailored to academic excellence would be coordinated through institute efforts, with a staff assisting and connecting faculty with appropriate service sites that met the learning objectives of their respective courses.

Following the recommendation of the Middle States Association, the provost initiated an innovative program, Discover New York (DNY), as a means of introducing freshmen to AS-L. Using New York City with its wealth of community sites and agencies serving the marginalized as a learning laboratory, freshmen perform at least six hours of service as written into course syllabi. The AS-L themes of (1) education and youth services, (2) hunger and homelessness, (3) civic engagement, and (4) health care supported the Vincentian perspective of "service with impact" while connecting to the many academic domains of the university's departments.

Faculty connect DNY course content and purpose to "real life" local community engagement. Focusing on the AS-L civic engagement theme, a professor of an English composition course has students write product descriptions for handmade goods made by women in developing countries. Another teaching a course on the moral theology of health care to pharmacy students has them understand compassion and the moral responsibilities as they work with the elderly at three local nursing and aging centers. Many faculty members ask students to perform more than the minimum hours and have structured AS-L service projects that exemplify the quality their respective disciplines can offer to a community partner. One faculty member from the Department of

Accounting and Taxation of the Peter J. Tobin College of Business coordinates the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) program to aid low-income New Yorkers. For the 2010 tax year, 85 upperclass undergraduate and first-year graduate students assisted residents in two boroughs with 3,485 federal and state income tax returns, resulting in refunds of nearly \$3 million. Another faculty member in the Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders of St. John's College asks graduate students in her Dysgraphia Theory and Practice course to become trained in a feeding technique for children with cleft palate. They perform service at the Ozanam Nursing home feeding people who have difficulty swallowing. At a second site, an orphanage in La Antiqua, Guatemala, graduate and undergraduate students assist and train staff in feeding techniques for infants with swallowing disorders, the premise being that proper feeding habits will improve speech.

During the past 3 years, the institute's AS-L staff has provided full-day conferences on service-learning concepts and methodology. These conferences have been attended by 111 full-time and 31 part-time faculty, and 13 administrators, each of whom received a certificate of completion. Additionally, in calendar year 2010, a total of 267 faculty and 4,359 students have engaged in service-learning activities for 96,833 hours with 125 community agencies in all five boroughs of New York City and Nassau and Suffolk counties of Long Island.

### **The Ozanam Scholars Program**

The Ozanam Scholars Program was created as a sustainable undergraduate program to advance the Vincentian tradition through dedicated student work. Outreach and scholarship offerings are provided to high school seniors with strong records of academic and service achievement. The Scholars Program was named to honor the Vincentian lay scholar and professor Frederick Ozanam who was inspired by St. Vincent de Paul's teachings and legacy and sought to address the challenge of poverty in 19th-century France. He formed the First Conference of Charity, now known as the St. Vincent de Paul Society, established in 130 countries on five continents.

The institute formulated the Scholars Program as a 4-year developmental model to educate and foster the scholars' academic, leadership, service, and Vincentian development whereby they engaged actively in research and sought solutions to issues of poverty and social injustice (see Table 1).

Table 1:  
Ozanam Scholar Four-Year Developmental Model

Year	Scholar Formation	Vincentian Service	Learning Outcomes
I. Vincentian Service, Academic Scholarship, National Citizenship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Tuesday Conferences</li> <li>2. Social Justice Minor</li> <li>3. Freshman Retreat</li> <li>4. Research Course (spring)</li> <li>5. Academic Conferences</li> <li>6. Ozanam Student Society</li> </ol>	<p>Introduction to service through Discover New York and service sites; perform 8 hours service per week (200/yr.) at community partner site, and Bridging to International Service in the month of May at San Juan, PR site</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Understand the causes of poverty from a Vincentian perspective.</li> <li>2. Understand and apply the Catholic Church's social teaching.</li> <li>3. Understand and integrate the value of service to an impoverished population in an academic, national, and metropolitan context.</li> <li>4. Understand, analyze, and apply Vincentian and Catholic values, virtues, and perspectives.</li> <li>5. Initiation into research techniques through service site involvement.</li> </ol>
II. Vincentian Service, Academic Scholarship, Global Citizenship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Study Abroad (fall or spring)</li> <li>2. Social Justice Minor</li> <li>3. Vincentian Heritage Tour (one week in France)</li> <li>4. Global Leaders to support service in Rome</li> <li>5. Ozanam Student Society</li> <li>6. Maintain Reflective Journals</li> <li>7. Research and Writing Workshops</li> <li>8. Academic Conferences sponsored by universities and nonprofits</li> </ol>	<p>International service through Study Abroad in Rome, France, or Spain, and perform 8 hours of service per week (200/yr.) at one of 12 strategic partner sites</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Demonstrate strong understanding of the functionality of a social agency in local and international contexts.</li> <li>2. Link basic social action terms and concepts to their service projects.</li> <li>3. Analyze and articulate the global needs and concerns of poverty.</li> <li>4. Learn research potential at international sites.</li> <li>5. Demonstrate understanding of connection between service and Vincentian leadership development through journal writing.</li> </ol>
III. Vincentian Service, Academic Scholarship, Global Citizenship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Independent Study Written Report</li> <li>2. Faculty Mentor Collaboration</li> <li>3. Social Justice Minor</li> <li>4. Research Symposium Luncheon</li> <li>5. Ozanam Student Society</li> <li>6. Academic Conferences sponsored by universities and nonprofits</li> <li>7. Become certified to conduct research by the NIH</li> </ol>	<p>Focused service of 4 hours per week based on an independent study project with a community partner</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Through community-based service, articulate a more complex understanding of the root causes of critical social problems as well as possible solution-based approaches.</li> <li>2. Through community-based service, demonstrate ability to report on common themes (e.g., with qualitative methodology) and best practices at various service sites; develop writing/research skills.</li> </ol>
IV. Vincentian Service, Academic Scholarship, Global Citizenship	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Capstone Project With Mentor Collaboration</li> <li>2. Social Justice Minor</li> <li>3. Research Symposium Luncheon</li> <li>4. Presentation at Academic Conference of Capstone Project</li> <li>5. Presentation at St. John's Research Week in April</li> <li>6. Ozanam Student Society</li> </ol>	<p>Focused service of 4 hours per week based on a capstone research project with a community partner, and an international service opportunity when applicable to capstone project</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Present report and contribute to scholar community through completion of Capstone community-based research.</li> <li>2. Reveal understanding of the Vincentian perspective and teaching of the Catholic tradition.</li> <li>3. External publication and conferences with mentor and scholar peers.</li> <li>4. Analyze results of graduating senior survey.</li> </ol>



During the first 4 years, 111 students have been accepted and have participated in the scholars program. They have provided service and conducted research with 12 institute-prioritized partners and agencies with many scholars remaining with a partner for 2 or 3 years as a capstone project is completed. In the 1-year period from the fall 2010 semester to the spring 2011 semester, scholars have fulfilled 4,821 service hours at home and abroad. For the 25 available Ozanam scholarships for the fall 2011 freshman class, there were 649 applicants.

### Faculty Involvement

Faculty play key roles in implementing the institute's programs and vision. They mentor, collaborate, and provide oversight on research projects, evaluate Ozanam Scholars' performance, establish academic service-learning projects for their students with additional agencies, and most important, reveal the Vincentian community spirit of service, reflection, and impact. A 5-member Faculty Research Consortium (FRC) has been formed with membership representing the various schools and colleges of the university. The FRC provides leadership and oversight for the institute's programs and coordinates efforts between the Ozanam Scholars and the AS-L programs and its community partners. An important role of the FRC is to foster research efforts and collaboration among faculty, partners, and students resulting in grants, publications, and professional conference presentations. The FRC also coordinates efforts with two larger faculty-member committees, the Faculty Advisory Committee (FAC) and the Faculty Advisory Board (FAB). The FAB provides oversight and direction for the AS-L programs, and the FAC acts as a liaison between the institute's administrative staff and the academic and scholarly pursuits of the Ozanam Scholars. The FAC faculty play a key role in evaluating the junior-year scholars' independent study projects and proposing to the FRC which projects would best merit continuation as capstone, senior-year projects.

Additional faculty throughout the university's academic departments provides mentorship and service. The first, and by far the largest in number, is with the traditional form of AS-L. As implemented at other institutions, the institute's AS-L is a classroom-based program that requires students to perform community service and uses the service activity as an applied understanding of course content. Faculty engaged in the service-learning commitment to the marginalized and poor challenge students to analyze and reflect upon their experiences through reflective journals.

Thirty-one faculty members worked closely with scholars on their indepen-

dent study and capstone projects. A faculty member mentoring a senior had begun working with that particular student during the junior year, allowing a project to develop and reach fruition over the 2-year period. Mentors reinforced the learnings of their particular academic disciplines as scholars pursued their projects. For instance, a psychology department mentor and scholar researched “The Addictive Relationship of Experience, Attribution, and Culture in Predicting Psychiatric Symptoms of Human Trafficking Survivors,” an accounting department team researched “Microfinance and the Poor: Issues of Sustainability and Profitability,” and a School of Education mentor and her student investigated “SAT Coaching in Unlikely Places: Offering Achievement Test Preparation to Students with Academic and Economic Needs.”

Finally, faculty served as active researchers or research consultants on projects requested by partner community agencies. In some cases, a faculty member or faculty team would have the assistance of Ozanam Scholars, who were assigned to the partner because their academic interests coincided with the purpose of the research, and in other cases, faculty committed to partner research endeavors as extensions of their own research pursuits.

### Community Partners

Beyond the various partnering agencies served by the AS-L component, the institute is presently collaborating with 12 additional community partners. In establishing strategic partnerships, the institute viewed each collaboration through three major lenses: 1.) Is the partner’s mission and purpose consistent with the institute’s Vincentian focus of alleviating poverty and social justice inequities?; 2.) Did the partner reveal a need for collaboration whereby the resources of both would support a mutual vision and mission?; and, 3.) Would the relationship be sustainable so that long-range research investigations would benefit the partner needs, scholarship growth of faculty, and the institute’s Vincentian mission? The appendix provides the name of each community agency accompanied by a website link. Space precludes discussing the scope and sequence provided by each unique partner as well the variety and depth of the programs occurring through the partnership collaboration.

## Research Methodology

### Overview

In an effort to investigate the service impact of the institute's major program components, outcomes-based quantitative and qualitative research was conducted. During the 2010–2011 academic year, 15 faculty members and 88 Ozanam Scholars participated in service and outcomes-based research projects with the community partners listed in the appendix. At St. John's Bread and Life, two service and two research projects have been initiated through institute collaboration to assist and study the lifestyles of the poor and needy. St. John's Bread and Life, an independent nonprofit agency located in the Bedford–Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, combats hunger and poverty each day, serving needy New Yorkers at its dining facility and unique mobile soup kitchen. Ozanam Scholars began a sustainable service project called Project Identity in 2008. The project, to date, has assisted 764 unique clients to achieve identity for social service benefits with registration for birth certificates, social security cards, non-driver's state identification cards, and other documents. Each semester and summer, a Bridge to Justice clinic has been provided by a law school professor and her students to assist immigrants with legal services, particularly in ways to achieve immigrant (green card and visa) status.

Institute collaboration with five partner agencies involved service work with in-school and out-of-school children and youth. For the GEAR UP program, 14 Ozanam Scholars were bused to participating middle and high schools to provide in-class support, particularly with the learning of SAT vocabulary words. For the Homes for the Homeless, Jumpstart, Project Hospitality, and the After-School All-Stars Programs, scholars again were bused to locations to provide homework help, improve literacy skills, and teach the relationship between food intake and nutrition.

The following section provides an overview of the data collection methods and findings related to the impact of the AS-L program, the Ozanam Scholars Program, and the Community Partner Research Program.

### Academic Service-Learning Outcomes

**Method.** Students, faculty, and community agencies completed an online survey every semester on a voluntary basis. Each survey had a 5-point rating scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree and allowed for respon-

dent comments. The fall 2010 survey was completed by 1,167 students, 44 faculty members, and 26 community agencies. While the wording and number of items on each survey differed, some items revealed that compatible perceptions existed among categories of raters.

**Student results and discussion.** While overall satisfaction with the AS-L experiences was rated in the neutral range (from 3.0 to 3.55) on the 19-item survey, students gave their highest ratings with respect to agency and community involvement: a 3.86 rating for overall satisfaction with service at a particular site; 3.69 for receiving adequate supervision and guidance from the agency; and 3.66 for believing that they made direct and immediate impact upon the community as result of their AS-L projects. While most of the narrative comments from students indicated the AS-L experience was very beneficial and enriching in that they learned a lot about their community and human beings, some noted that they had difficulty connecting their service to course work and that they would have liked more “real life,” hands-on experiences.

**Faculty results and discussion.** Faculty offered an overall rating of 4.02 (agree) on their 34-item survey. They gave very high ratings to AS-L as a way by which faculty could participate in the university’s Catholic, Vincentian mission (4.61) and in beliefs that their students learn valuable skills and develop personal values through AS-L that they would not learn in a traditional course format (4.51). Faculty believed that AS-L encouraged students to support St. Vincent’s mission to reach out to assist those in need, and that students themselves were aware that they made a significant positive contribution to the community. They also understood what was expected of them when they participated in AS-L (4.59). Interestingly, the lowest rated item (2.93) revealed that they did not believe that adequate credit was recognized for AS-L participation when personnel actions occurred such as for reappointment, tenure, and promotion.

**Community results and discussion.** On their 16-item survey, community partner agencies rated their overall satisfaction with the AS-L program rather positively (4.21). They believed that their input and feedback was taken into consideration during the student placement process (4.38), that students provided quality service (4.44), that students made a direct and immediate impact upon their communities (4.28), and that the service provided by the university had been rewarding (4.38). Many site respondents reported having had a positive experience working with students, that students were able to form strong connections with agency clients and with the community at large, and that students actually helped to keep particular agency programs running. Some

organizations reported they have hired AS-L students and that some students continued with community service projects after the AS-L mandatory experience was completed.

### **Ozanam Scholars Program Outcomes**

**Method.** A great deal of effort was directed to measuring the potential impact of the newly instituted Ozanam Scholars Program. Scholars were evaluated by rubrics, completed pre- and postsurveys, and responded in writing to questionnaire items.

**Rubric results and discussion.** Scholars were evaluated by institute administrators at the midpoint of each academic year with a rubric system to determine how well annual program developmental guidelines were being met (see Table 1). Each year, they were rated on the five components of academics, service, participation, assignments, and communication and leadership performance by a 4-point scale ranging from excellent (4) to insufficient (1). This evaluation served as formative assessment after which conferences occurred to support scholar work or to offer suggestions for improvement.

Scholars' junior-year independent study projects were evaluated by their own mentor, a secondary faculty member, and two institute administrators by a rubric containing research-proposal components such as statement of the problem, literature review, methodology, and organization. The combined average of all raters revealed that on the 5-point scale, seven scholars achieved a rating between 4.1 and 5.0; 14 between 3.1 and 4.09; five between 2.1 and 3.09; and one between 1.1 and 2.09. Besides evaluation of the written project, raters indicated which projects they believed appropriate for actual implementation as a senior-year capstone project, particularly with a community partner.

Scholars were also rated by site supervisors of each community partner agency with a 17-item online survey of five rankings; unsatisfactory (1) to outstanding (5), during the spring 2010 semester. Ratings from seven participating partners revealed an overall rating of 4.05 (above average) with a range of 3.91 (item #3, assists with implementation of the objectives of the organization) to 4.40 (item #1, understands the purpose of the organization). Low ratings on items by a partner resulted in feedback to institute staff in ways to improve collaboration between scholars' service and partner expectations. In the case of the somewhat low ratings by the Advantage Academy supervisors, the institute staff realized that scholars lacked the appropriate skills to tutor the homeless adult population in their business-oriented course work. Subsequently, that

assignment was dropped after partner supervisor feedback.

**Survey results and discussion.** Three types of surveys were used to assess scholar performance. One online self-report survey of 27 items, scored by a 4-point scale ranging from poor (1) to very well (4), asked scholars to rate the four areas of student development, social justice and service development, academic development, and the Vincentian perspective. While incoming freshmen scholars of 2008 and 2009 rated themselves rather well in most areas with many scores in the 3.0 plus range, they were not as confident or knowledgeable with items regarding the Vincentian tradition and perspectives, achieving average scores of 2.88 and 2.69, respectively. It would become noteworthy for the institute to determine during senior year posttesting if ratings in the Vincentian area change positively due to the 4-year immersion in the scholars program, particularly with such experiences as the Vincentian Heritage Tour where sophomores walked in the steps of St. Vincent and participated in the required theology course on his life.

With the incoming freshmen scholars of 2009, the institute began experimental use with the Community Service Attitudes Scale (CSAS) (Shiarella, McCarthy, & Tucker, 2000). The CSAS was reported to be useful for researchers investigating the effects of service-learning and community service experiences for students. The 46 items in this self-report scale are scored on a range of 1=extremely unlikely to 7=extremely likely. Based on presurvey results, the scholars rated themselves quite highly in regards to their current attitudes toward community service (most in the 6.0 range=quite likely). These findings may not be that surprising since students were selected into the scholars program based on former commitments to service and social justice.

Graduating scholars of May 2011 (N=30) completed a final self-report survey of 20 items with a scale range of 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree and two questions that required written responses. Scholars rated their perceptions and feelings regarding partner involvement and service, research skills, Vincentian attitude toward needy populations, and personal impact. All mean responses indicated a positive direction with the lowest mean at 3.70 (*SD* 1.15), “the senior year capstone project was a worthwhile project.” While the large standard deviation revealed that there was much variability in the scholars’ rating of the capstone experience, they rated the item, “the program made an impact upon your attitude regarding the need to serve the needy,” the highest mean at 4.6 with a low standard deviation of 0.56.

Within the survey the four cluster areas of partner service (PS,  $M = 4.18$ ), research (R,  $M = 3.97$ ), personal development (PD,  $M = 4.38$ ), and Vincentian

perspective (VP,  $M = 4.07$ ) were identified. An analysis using paired sample t-tests revealed that the comparisons between PD and R ( $t_{29} = 3.237, p = .003$ ) and PD and VP ( $t_{29} = 3.986, p < .000$ ) were significant beyond the 0.01 alpha level. These results suggest that the 4-year program impacted positively on the scholars' personal development of serving the needy, even more so than the focus on research and the Vincentian perspective.

However, when writing their reactions to the work performed on their research-based capstone project, common statements expressed by scholars throughout were: "enjoyment;" "passionate;" "excitement;" "opening of eyes to see unfortunate circumstances;" "positive way to tie experience as a scholar;" "positive experience especially with relationship to mentor;" "realization of the importance of research;" "tremendous learning experience helping to a career path;" "helped connect to field of study;" "helped with development as a leader;" and "hard work pays off!"

### Community Partner Research Outcomes

**Method.** Partner research occurred at three levels. First, as with the AS-L and the Ozanam Scholar Programs, partners were asked to evaluate the relationship between the institute itself (its commitment, collaboration, deliverables, etc.) and the partner through the use of a survey instrument. Second, discrete research projects requested by a partner agency were initiated by the institute as it elicited faculty and faculty teams to carry out the research often with Ozanam Scholars as assistants. Third, senior-year scholars conducted their own research through their capstone projects with both a faculty mentor(s) and partner staff providing oversight and guidance.

**Use of surveys to rate institute.** Strategic agencies rated the partnership by responding to an 11-item survey instrument containing a 5-point scale, ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree. Ratings were on a 4.35 level for the fall 2009 semester and on a 4.24 level for the spring 2010 semester. Lowest ratings were provided by the GEAR-UP executive director (3.27 and 3.64), who noted that the program was not meeting the needs of the GEAR-UP students. The scheduling of undergraduate classes for the Ozanams coincided with scheduled time they were needed at public school sites to provide tutoring and mentoring services for economically disadvantaged junior high youth.

**Unique community-based research projects.** While many projects with partners remained at the service level, examples of unique research projects

with partner collaborative input were initiated.

*The Advantage Academy outcomes and discussion.* For instance, the Advantage Academy Program was offered to homeless adults. The program allowed them to earn an associate degree in business offered by the university and may be the first of its kind in the country with respect to commitment to mission and sustainability. The New York City Department of Homeless Services (NYCDHS), the community partner, assisted students with subsidized housing, transportation, and in some cases, child care, while the university through its College of Professional Studies (CPS) provided full-time course work, partially funded through Pell eligibility over a 2-year period (Fairbanks, 2009). The ultimate goal of the project was for the associate degree graduates to either enter the workforce or continue advanced schooling in efforts to raise their lifestyle from one of poverty and agency reliance to one of self-sufficiency.

Of the 45 students in cohort 1 who were accepted into the Advantage Academy program in the summer of 2009, 11 graduated with the AS degree in May 2011, with two students pending graduation upon completion of course work. Quantitative and qualitative analyses were conducted to measure participant progress and outcome results. Specifically, issues examined related to demographic information, student reasons for program departure and noncompletion, course attendance, AccuPlacer Diagnostic scores (The College Board, 2009), midterm and final course GPAs, tutoring sessions attended, self-efficacy beliefs, and future prospects for program completers. Institute and CPS administrators learned early on through formative evaluations that strong significant correlations occurred between course grades (midterm and final) and reading and mathematics ability as measured by the AccuPlacer Diagnostic exam and course attendance.

Two self-efficacy instruments were administered in pre-/postfashion to assess cohort 1 participants' perceptions of themselves before and after 2-year completion of the program course work. A general self-efficacy scale (GSS), consisting of 10 items (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), asked participants to respond to their "life experiences in general" and the best way their beliefs might be described on a Likert scale that ranged from 1, "not at all true," to 4, "exactly true." A second instrument, the self-efficacy for regulated learning (SERL) scale consisting of 11 items was designed to measure the degree to which students are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally proactive regulators of their own learning processes (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Participants responded to the items based on their "school experiences in general" using a 7-point rating scale ranging from 1, "not well at all," to 7,



“very well.”

During preadministration of the GSS, the 11 participants achieved a mean rating of 3.05 ( $SD$  0.38) with a range of mean ratings for the 10 individual items from 2.73 to 3.36, and on the SERL, they scored a mean rating of 5.05 ( $SD$  1.06) with a range of average ratings for the 11 items from 4.09 to 5.45. At program completion, participants obtained an average GSS score of 3.68 ( $SD$  0.37) with an item range from 3.55 to 3.82, and on the 11-item SERL, they attained a mean rating of 5.93 ( $SD$  = 0.63) with an item range of 5.0 to 6.36. Mean differences of 0.63 on the GSS and 0.88 on the SERL were significant at the 0.01 level. Furthermore, significance at the 0.05 and 0.01 levels occurred between pre- and postcompletion for all 10 items on the GSS, and for eight items on the SERL. While results may not be compared to a similar group who did not experience the Advantage Academy, such positive changes in the ratings over the 2-year time suggest that the study and discipline of the business degree program had a positive influence on the participants' self-efficacy beliefs and perceptions. Upon graduation, six have secured full-time employment and three have been accepted into 4-year BS programs.

In interviews conducted with some of the 36 participants in cohort 1 who exited the program, the four main problem themes of (1) personal issues, (2) social support, (3) program administration, and (4) academics arose; the latter concerned with difficulties completing course assignments and keeping up acceptable course grades. Efforts were made by institute staff and DHS to remedy the difficulties encountered during the cohort 1 program. Cohort 2 began in the fall 2010 semester with 41 participants who had achieved higher AccuPlacer reading and arithmetic scores. After first-year completion of course work with stronger participant attendance and institute support services, 30 participants remained. Sustainability of the partnership with DHS remains as the third cohort is being recruited for fall 2012 matriculation. Interviews have been conducted with 64 of 107 applicants and 30 of the 64 have met the eligibility criteria, an important one being a composite score of 150 on the AccuPlacer Diagnostic exams.

*Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health services (LSA) results and discussion.* The institute initiated a procedure to assist Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Services (LSA) in evaluating the views of clients using its many services. LSA seeks to help the poor, the needy, and the most vulnerable of the East Harlem, New York, community with its largely immigrant and Spanish-speaking population, assisting to date 1,000 participating families in developing skills and confidence to become independent of social

services. The procedure involved the use of a 15-item questionnaire administered by five Ozanam Scholars to randomly selected clients. The scholars, supported by four Spanish-speaking translators, conducted their interviews with 27 clients over six consecutive Tuesdays. Interviews were transcribed, coded, and analyzed for patterns by institute staff.

The results indicated that over an 18-year period, the 27 clients used and attended 17 differing LSA programs, such as those dealing with early childhood development, adult education, nursing, public assistance access, and educational services to youth and parents. Due to participation in such services, 26 clients noted that they felt more confident, 25 believed they were emotionally supported, 20 engaged in more involvement with the community and with their children's schooling; and all noted they would recommend LSA services to a friend or relative.

A second study was initiated by a psychology professor of St. John's College. His goal was to assist LSA in evaluating the impact and the quality of services within its Home Based Nursery and Home Based Socialization programs. LSA provided data it had collected through use of the Ages and Stages Questionnaire (ASQ-3) (Squires & Bricker, 2009) and the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Radloff, 1977). The ASQ-3 is designed to screen young children between the ages of 1 month to 5 1/2 years for developmental delays and the CES-D, developed by the National Institute of Mental Health, serves to detect major or clinical depression in adults.

While analysis of the ASQ-3 over four to five months administration periods revealed little change, with problem solving ( $p = 0.088$ ) and communication ( $p = 0.080$ ) approaching statistical significance, the CES-D revealed for at-risk primary care givers a significant reduction in depression symptoms from initial to final assessment ( $t = 3.87, p = 0.001$ ). While LSA welcomed these findings associated with one of its agency programs in a positive way, collaborative efforts are continuing to ascertain the effects of its other major services and the degree to which combination of agency services and programs impact upon the clients' well-being and life-improvement skills.

*St. John's Bread and Life results and discussion.* Two research-based projects have been initiated at St. John's Bread and Life (B&L), located in the Bedford-Stuyvesant area of Brooklyn, New York. Of the community's population of 300,000, approximately one in three lives in poverty. Furthermore many B&L clients have difficulty providing food for their families and many experience chronic physical and mental health problems. The agency has instituted a digital choice food pantry (DCFP) system, which allows clients to use a swipe-

card and touch-screen system to order three days of food once a month for their families. Since the system also tracks the food choices clients make, B&L has added a “nutritional weighting” system. The healthier a food item selected, the fewer points deducted from a client’s account. For example, fresh fruits and seasonal vegetables have a point value of zero. Thus, the selection of more “healthy” food items results in more food for the family; likewise, less healthy choices results in greater points being deducted from the client’s account.

A professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology conducted a research project by developing a 10-question opinion survey of B&L’s client use of the DCFP. Ozanam Scholars acting as research assistants conducted face-to-face interviews with 50 clients after they made their food choices. Both strengths and weaknesses noted from the client’s responses were shared with B&L so that modifications could be made to the system. A capstone project by Ozanam Scholars will continue under the professor’s mentorship as they investigate the relationship of poverty and malnutrition to food choices and if the DCFP system provides an effective way to learn about the health benefits of a nutritious diet.

A second research study using both quantitative and qualitative assessments is being initiated by two psychology professors to measure the psychological effects of the services provided by B&L. Using various questionnaires as well as focus groups and interviews to assess conditions such as self-esteem, self-efficacy, gratitude, and satisfaction, the researchers hypothesize that clients who use multiple services and have a sustained relationship with B&L will experience a positive sense of well-being and psychological growth.

### **General Discussion and Practical Implications**

This article has presented ways in which an institute of higher education has engaged its collective members to be agents in advancing its Catholic and Vincentian mission. A strategic approach was implemented as a dual way to offset the diminishing role of the Vincentian religious community to teach, mentor, and lead while advancing programs in the spirit of the Vincentian tradition to deal with issues of poverty and social injustice. All levels of the university community from incoming freshmen to the board of trustees become involved in Vincentian outreach to serve the poor, needy, and disenfranchised.

A key aspect of the St. John’s strategy approach was the formation of the Vincentian Institute for Social Action. The institute, serving as a central management agency, mediated the efforts of students, faculty, administrators, and

partners in a collaborative, constructive way to support the Vincentian mission. Fellow institutions wishing to implement a similar culture of service and research might well consider the establishment of such an agency, provided that adequate financial and staff resources are available to advance the mission and vision of the institute. A second aspect to consider is the formation of the organizational structure to carry out the day-to-day work of such an institute. The St. John's structure was organized around four major committees, which had membership composed of faculty and institute program managers as well as faculty members who worked across all or several of the committees. For instance, the FRC chair participated in the weekly institute administrative meetings chaired by the executive director, held his own monthly FRC meeting, and participated in the monthly meetings of the two faculty support groups providing oversight for the Ozanam Scholars and the AS-L programs. This shared involvement provided a great deal of transparency and positive direction among institute parts, as each contributed to the success of the whole.

By establishing a culture of collaboration and academic integrity within a mission-oriented framework, fellow institutions can establish a win-win scenario whereby everyone gets something while contributing to the common good. This culture was made evident by Catholic and Vincentian institutions discussed earlier in this article as they directed service efforts and resources to enhance community-based learning. In the Vincentian tradition of "action with impact," the St. John's community worked to establish win-win outcomes for students, faculty, and community partners. Faculty across the six colleges have the opportunity to collaborate with students in either the AS-L or Ozanam Scholars program to pursue service and research projects with community partners. Faculty win by having institute and student support to conduct research in their areas of interest with disenfranchised populations.

Evidence suggests that students engaged in either the AS-L or Ozanam Scholars programs learn the intrinsic value of service while many develop research skills. The 4-year service and research developmental model established for the Ozanam Scholars program allowed for a vibrant, dynamic way for close interactions to occur among students, faculty mentors, and community partners. The 30 graduating scholars of 2011 demonstrated the success of the model as they completed 11 research-based capstone projects, presented to their student peers and faculty during a university-sponsored research week, presented at five international, national, and state professional conferences, were featured 11 times on the university's online newsletter, and with their faculty mentors, had one journal article published with one article still in peer review.

Then there are those unforeseen benefits that occur in a young person's life while engaging in service and community-based learning that others may wish to capture. A scholar, Ms. Charity Cast, preparing for her senior-year capstone research project writes:

What interests me about this program (the Advantage Academy), is its uniqueness in turning acts of charity into social justice. Instead of giving out aid in the form of money or tangible items they are giving the opportunity for knowledge, which essentially is power for an underrepresented population. From working at the Academy (as a sophomore), I have personally seen the struggles of the students, as they must work for what has been given to them while balancing their own personal hardships of living in poverty. The lives and struggles of these students were such an inspiration, and continue to be as I continue my relationship with them through scholarly work.

Community partners gain program support and scientifically-based evidence to support their own unique social-oriented missions and to enhance their funding opportunities. This type of benefit to partners strengthens a criticism noted in the literature regarding the paucity of research and formal program evaluation of the agencies served (Schmidt & Robby, 2002). While the benefits of service learning for students and faculty are well documented, there appears to be less information reported of the impact of service for community partners (Ferrari & Worrall, 2000; Worrall, 2007). Thus, it becomes important for institutions to interact in a highly positive way with community agencies to view them as real partners and not solely as convenient service sites (Keith, 2005). The partner and the host institution need to jointly plan service and research efforts so that partnership building and sustaining relationships become an institutional focus (Ammon, Furco, Chi, & Middaugh, 2001; Kramer, 2000; Sather, Carlson & Weitz, 2007). St John's, through its Vincentian Institute outreach, has achieved sustainable program and research projects that are highly beneficial to members of both the university and the partner agency. Research conducted with the New York City Department of Homeless Services, St. John's Bread and Life, Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Services, the Doe Fund, GEAR UP, and PARTNERS provided each partner with documented evidence of the quality of the programs and services they provide.

Making extrinsic rewards available for students and faculty might be an-

other procedure for fellow institutions to consider. For instance, students have the opportunity to compete annually for three monetary prizes in an AS-L sponsored reflective essay contest. Faculty members from each of the six schools can earn an AS-L grant of \$1,000 to begin a new community-based project or to move an ongoing project forward. Faculty can attend a full-day training course in AS-L methodology, which entitles them to receive a small monetary stipend, a framed certificate, and an additional \$250 for implementing AS-L in a course. Furthermore, faculty are nominated by their peers to receive AS-L and Institute achievement awards for outstanding service and research at convocations and ceremonies.

Another important consideration pertains to the use of evaluation. Host institutions need to establish ways to investigate the impact of service and research with constituents of the service communities. One way is to determine if attitudes and perceptions of those engaged in the project (students, faculty, and clients) become altered or enhanced due to the project intervention. Here, surveys, attitude scales, focus groups, personal narratives, and interviews may assist. Qualitative research methods such as analyzing reflective comments for common themes on selective criteria or using quantitative scales would allow faculty and institutions to determine if service-learning projects were achieving their intended goals (Scepansky, 2004; VanSlyle, 2006). Besides summative evaluations and reports, institutions need to implement formative assessments, particularly with community agency constituents to determine if program methodology is meeting their needs. This was a particularly positive procedure when formative assessments occurred regarding course grade scores and course attendance for the Advantage Academy students followed by focus groups sessions. Institute and CPS administrators learned that cohort 1 students were unhappy with a limitation of the cohort model at a Manhattan site in that they felt isolated and removed from the mainstream university culture. Moving forward with cohorts 2 and 3, an adjustment was made to include Advantage Academy students in classes with the general population of undergraduates at the Queens main campus. While transportation became a greater issue for these students, attendance and fidelity to the program has improved.

### Conclusion

St. John's has successfully addressed the challenge of strengthening its Vincentian tradition. It implemented a Pope's call to service and a challenge by the Middle States Association to develop a strategic plan that imbedded the

Vincenzian mission into the academic life of the university in a meaningful and measurable way. A unique aspect of the plan was the formation of the scholarship-based Ozanam Scholar program, which fused undergraduates with faculty to accomplish outcomes-based research and hours of dedicated service to benefit community partners serving the needy. With such a positive climate, many partners were made to feel that they were part of the university community.

Challenges in program implementation remain. For instance, the institute needs to investigate ways in which the AS-L component can provide more “real life” experiences for students as they connect course content with agency programs. The university also needs to weigh the recognition of service when faculty personnel actions take place. A final challenge remains with achieving sustainability of mission focus with practice, aligning institute components of committees, faculty, and students to benefit the global community.

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*Richard Sinatra, PhD, is professor of literacy, director of the Reading and Writing Education Center, and associate dean of the School of Education at St. John's University. In 2009, he was appointed by the university president to be the academic chair of the Faculty Research Consortium, a university-wide committee of research faculty to promote faculty and student research under the auspices of the Vincentian Institute for Social Action.*

*The Rev. James J. Maher, C.M., D.MIN., is currently the executive vice president for Mission and Student Services at St. John's University. He has also served as vice president of University Ministry, vice president of Student Affairs, and executive director of the Vincentian Institute for Social Action, a university-wide initiative to promote social justice. He presently serves on the board of the St. John's Bread and Life Program, is a trustee for DePaul and Niagara Universities, and is the provincial counselor to the Eastern Province of the Vincentian Community.*

*Correspondence regarding this article can be sent to Dr. Sinatra at [sinatrar@stjohns.edu](mailto:sinatrar@stjohns.edu).*

## Appendix

New York City Department of Homeless Services (DHS)  
<http://www.nyc.gov/html/dhs/html/home/home.shtml>

St. John's Bread and Life  
<http://www.breadandlife.org/>

Little Sisters of the Assumption Family Health Services (LSA)  
<http://www.littlesistersfamily.org/>

The Doe Fund  
<http://www.doe.org/>

Grameen America  
<http://www.grameenamerica.com/>

Gear Up  
[http://www.hesc.com/content.nsf/NYGEARUP/NYGEAR\\_UP](http://www.hesc.com/content.nsf/NYGEARUP/NYGEAR_UP)

Homes for the Homeless  
[www.hfhny.org](http://www.hfhny.org)

Jump Start  
<http://www.hfhny.org/>

PARTNERS  
[http://www.stjohns.edu/academics/centers/community\\_services/psychology/partners](http://www.stjohns.edu/academics/centers/community_services/psychology/partners)

After-School All-Stars  
[www.afterschoolallstars.org/](http://www.afterschoolallstars.org/)

Trump Pavilion  
<http://trumppavilion.org/>

Project Hospitality  
<http://www.projecthospitality.org/>