

ALLEGHENY COLLEGE
FINAL REPORT – CORE COMMITMENTS

To: Caryn Musil, Senior Vice President, AAC&U
From: Amara Geffen, Team Leader, Core Commitments *at* Allegheny College
Date: June 7, 2009
Re: Final Report

CONTEXT

Allegheny College supports an impressive array of innovative programs and centers that foster civic engagement and provide opportunities for our students to develop personal and social responsibility. Many of these programs are located under the umbrella of the College's Civic Engagement Council (CEC) including:

- The Center for Economic and Environmental Development (CEED): This award-winning program engages students, faculty and the community in creating innovative approaches to environmental stewardship, environmental education and regional revitalization. CEED works in close partnership with the local community to foster community and economic development and to create a sustainable Meadville.
- The Center for Political Participation (CPP): The CPP fosters appreciation for the vital link between an engaged, active citizenry and a healthy democracy, and seeks new strategies and mechanisms for promoting political participation among all citizens, especially young Americans.
- The Office of Community Service and Service-Learning (CSSL): Part of the Center for Experiential Learning, CSSL empowers students to understand and respond to community needs through numerous service opportunities, thereby helping the College bridge curricular and co-curricular initiatives.
- Values, Ethics and Social Action (VESA): In this interdisciplinary minor, students explore models of change for the common good and develop skills for effective social action through an academic program that is grounded in a strong service component.
- Engagement through Writing: *The Civic Engagement Newsletter*, published every semester by Fahrner Fellows working with CEC programs, highlights College-community collaborations that demonstrate best practices in public scholarship, applied liberal arts learning, civic and political engagement, and community service. (The Fahrner Fellows program is supported through an endowed fund that is designated to assist college – community collaborative projects designed to strengthen the Meadville area.) The newsletter is distributed on campus, in the surrounding community, and to a national and international network.
- Community-Based Research (CBR): Co-located in ACCEL and CEED, CBR links faculty, students and the community in mutually beneficial research collaborations involving departments such as Art, Economics, English, Environmental Science and Psychology, as well as several community engagement programs, including Davies Leaders, CEED interns, and Fahrner Fellows.

There also are several other departmentally based and/or interdisciplinary academic programs whose content and pedagogy involve an exploration of questions of ethical and moral behavior, and issues of diversity and community engagement. Allegheny College's Center for Experiential Learning (ACCEL) also provides many opportunities for co-curricular experiences that emphasize student engagement and service for the greater good. It is from this rich array of curricular and co-curricular opportunities that Allegheny's involvement in Core Commitments has been grounded.

While Allegheny College did not receive funding from AAC&U for our participation in the Core Commitments program, we were eager to participate because we believed that in doing so, we would discover opportunities to nurture and sustain a culture of collaboration between the Academic and Student Affairs Divisions of the College. In addition, we believed that the CEC's collaboration in the Core Commitments program had the potential to unite our various programs and centers around a common cause and help us strengthen teaching for personal and social responsibility at Allegheny College.

During the two years we participated in Core Commitments, we engaged between three and four Core Commitments Fellows annually; participated in three Leadership Meetings (DC 2007; Vermont 2007; Portland 2008); hosted six College–community dialogues that explored possibilities for collaborations to revitalize the College's gateway neighborhoods and foster economic vitality; and facilitated three campus dialogues focused on conduct and civility both on and off campus. In addition, we supported the efforts of key student leaders (Allegheny Student Government and independent student activists) who sought to emphasize personal, social and environmental responsibility.

In Fall 2007, we administered the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI) to all members of the Allegheny campus community, including students, faculty and staff. That semester, we developed a variation of the student survey for alumni and surveyed a random sample of 747 alumni. We also developed a variation of the faculty-staff survey and asked 64 community partners to complete this. Our response rates were reasonable and varied by group; 36 percent of students, 29 percent of alumni, 63 percent of faculty and staff, and 43 percent of community partners responded to their respective version of the PSRI.

Our decision to focus our efforts in these particular areas was both practical and strategic, building upon the momentum of existing campus initiatives, while working carefully and intentionally to stimulate interest in the Core Commitments. For example, in 2006, former President Richard Cook convened a Task Force on Environmental Responsibility, and in 2007, the Diversity and Gender Equity Committee was established. The work of both these groups was clearly connected to the efforts of the Core Commitments initiative, and it seemed essential to streamline and integrate our efforts to ensure that the campus community was not pulled in too many directions at one time. By aligning our resources and the initiatives we focused on with strategic College goals, we were able to assist in bringing greater awareness to the Core Commitments.

A [summary report](#) of Year One was produced during summer 2008, along with a [poster](#) of our initiatives and PRSI results.

YEAR TWO ACCOMPLISHMENTS

During Year Two, we developed synergies and built bridges across a range of campus initiatives that would otherwise have remained fragmented and disconnected. We resolved philosophical conflicts about utilization of PSRI data to foster dialogue and identified opportunities to connect mutually relevant groups and initiatives in support of Core Commitments, such as the work of the Diversity & Gender Equity Committee and the College's plans for development of a Climate Study to be coordinated by Dr. Susan Rankin, senior research associate at the Pennsylvania State University's Center for the Study of Higher Education and director of Rankin & Associates Consulting (<http://www.rankin-consulting.com/index.html>).

In addition, we worked behind the scenes to support a range of student leaders in their efforts to bring issues of personal, social and environmental responsibility to student government and student affairs via the creation of an EcoReps program as well as in their efforts to develop a community pledge for incoming students.

Two dialogues were held, one per semester, that brought otherwise isolated groups together into mutual conversations around the PSRI results, with special focus on issues of [conduct and civility](#) and [campus climate](#).

Remaining Challenges: While much progress has been made during the past two years, work remains to clarify organizing structures and provide a stronger mechanism for collaboration among our programs. Given the nature of Allegheny's governance system, and the entrepreneurial and proprietary nature of our faculty, the best method for the Allegheny campus demands a system that honors and supports individual faculty initiatives and at the same time links those initiatives to other, larger College plans. This can be accomplished not only by providing strong leadership from within the College, but also by maintaining awareness of the need to support faculty engagement in efforts to teach personal and social responsibility through rigorous academic programs that emphasize active, engaged and community-centered learning, and to assist in directing students in their work with community partners.

OVERALL PROJECT GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Through our work, we note the following best outcomes:

1) Building bridges for integration to support institutional change.

As a result of our participation in Core Commitments:

- The chair of the Civic Engagement Council (CEC) and the director of the office of Community Service and Service Learning meet regularly to ensure a more seamless connection between academic and student affairs initiatives that are linked to Core Commitments and our work in the local community.
- Ongoing discussions are held about how best to expand CEC to bring more faculty and staff into engagement with this work. One strong possibility is that we will invite all interested faculty and staff to participate in a year-long series of monthly lunches that will include discussion of issues relevant to Core Commitments and our civic and community engagement initiatives.

- Members of the Committee on Diversity and Sexual Harassment, the Diversity & Gender Equity Committee, the Task Force on Diversity, Community and Freedom of Speech, Faculty Council, Allegheny Student Government, Campus Diversity Scholars, Office of Student Engagement, Office of Diversity Affairs, Dean of Students Office and the Campus Life Committee were brought together on three occasions to discuss conduct, civility and campus climate using PSRI results as a basis for discussion. In the past, each of these groups has tended to work autonomously. One of the dialogues involved bringing these campus constituents into conversation with Dr. Rankin during her initial planning and fact-finding visits to our campus.
- Supporting efforts to create a campus-wide “Theme of the Year” will help link CEC programming, the College’s Public Events Committee and departmental lectures, thereby streamlining and strengthening our co-curricular lectures and cultural programs so that they are more closely aligned. A future goal includes building more formal bridges between Theme of the Year programs and the Freshman/Sophomore curriculum. A summary of events for 2008-09 is linked [here](#).

2) *Fostering student leadership for transformational change on and off campus*

A number of initiatives and new programs have been developed as a result of our participation in Core Commitments including:

- The Allegheny College EcoReps program, which is designed to nurture an environmentally literate campus through peer motivation, was developed. This student-run initiative has supported the College’s participation in RecycleMania, an annual national college competition aimed at waste minimization; sponsored the "One Less Cup Campaign," an effort to educate the campus community about the importance of reuse and waste minimization; and organized a Recycled Crafts Fair, which sought to raise awareness on campus about the RecycleMania program while emphasizing the importance of reusing materials in innovative ways. We plan for this to become an annual program.
- Core Commitments Fellows met with Allegheny Student Government on numerous occasions to seek support for EcoReps initiatives, Core Commitments endeavors and development of a Community Pledge, which we believe will be implemented during matriculation in the fall of 2009.
- We sent two Core Commitments Fellows to the *Be the Change Forum* at Babson College in April 2009. One of the Fellows is working this summer to develop plans for continuing Core Commitments initiatives among student activists and leaders to help continue the momentum toward transforming student culture at Allegheny.
- We developed regular opportunities to bring student leaders together. Prior to Core Commitments, Allegheny students participating as Davies Leaders, Fahrner Fellows, Center for Economic and Environmental Development (CEED) Interns, Center for Political Participation (CPP) Fellows, Bonner Leaders, and Values, Ethics and Social Action (VESA) Interns did not have a formal mechanism through which to meet and learn about each other’s work. Student leaders in these programs currently are exploring

the possibility of creating an electronic magazine and discussion board that can provide additional opportunities for social networking and greater connectivity.

3) Facilitating College-community dialogues and strengthening partnerships

- Six College-community dialogues were held to explore opportunities to integrate our community-focused work. These dialogues have helped us strengthen partnerships with the City of Meadville, the Redevelopment Authority, the Meadville Medical Center and area businesses, uniting key partners around mutual goals for community and economic development. In March, President James Mullen engaged Steve Davies, senior vice president of Project for Public Spaces (PPS) and a native of Meadville, to assist us in introducing College and community partners to the concept of Placemaking. Through this workshop, and several CEED and Davies Leaders initiatives, we are well on our way to formalizing a community-planning group designed to envision opportunities for community development and renewal.

4) Insertion of the 3 Rs (personal, social and environmental responsibility) into the strategic planning process

Allegheny recently began a strategic planning process, which will guide the College through the next decade. As a reflection of the vitality of the Core Commitments on the Allegheny campus, one of the six areas of study for the planning team was named the “3Rs.” The planning team has just concluded an intensive three-week session in which discussion of the Core Commitments played a central role, permeating conversations among the various planning teams. Six focus areas were identified for the strategic planning process, including the 3Rs, Integrative Thinking, Meadville, Internationalization, Diversity, and Unusual Combinations, with the work of the Core Commitments’ program providing a vital link across these areas. In fact, many of the ideas coming out of the planning group’s work converge with and/or have emerged from our Core Commitments’ campus initiatives. For example, the 3Rs and the Integrative Thinking Group both identified fragmentation between Student and Academic Affairs as a major issue and both groups, as well as the Meadville group, came up with ideas for integration, some based upon recommendations from Core Commitments team members. In addition, the 3Rs group will build directly on the community pledge developed by our Core Commitments student leaders. The strategic planning team also talked about wellness and education of the whole student, which again provided a focus for Core Commitments’ campus initiatives. There is little doubt that the work we have done has had a significant influence on the planning process and will likely continue to play an essential role as we move forward with our planning efforts.

While each of these outcomes in and of itself is important, perhaps most important is that, as a result of our continual efforts to keep conversations on the Core Commitments in the spotlight during the past two years, we have been able to stimulate a broader perspective and help foster a culture of increased engagement across a wide variety of constituents from student leaders to top campus administrators.

LARGER INITIATIVE GOALS

- Without a doubt, the dialogues have been vital for strengthening campus commitment to and understanding of the need for increased depth and breadth of efforts to support education for personal and social responsibility. Perhaps as a result of existing fragmentation of programs, and the absence of adequate funding, and perhaps, too,

because the College community has been reluctant to develop new initiatives in advance of the strategic planning process, we have not made as much headway as we otherwise might have made. However, our involvement in Core Commitments has helped lay a solid foundation for future changes that will undoubtedly emerge through the strategic planning process. Opportunities for better coordination and coherence have clearly surfaced through our work.

- Specific quantitative assessments of the number of students affected by the work of the Core Commitments program were not taken. Estimates suggest that at least 200 students have participated directly in Core Commitments' dialogues and programs. Each of these students, however, holds some sort of leadership position, and most have carried their experiences forward, thereby expanding the impact of our work outward to greater numbers of students. Through the Theme of the Year initiatives during both 2007 and 2008, it is safe to say that the vast majority of Allegheny students attended or participated in some activity or lecture that was at least loosely tied to the Core Commitments program. With respect to participating in service, campus estimates suggest that at least 70 percent of Allegheny students engage in some form of service to the community. With respect to a developmental arc for students, at present the strongest opportunities exist through our special minors, such as VESA; Arts & the Environment; Science, Health & Society; Gay and Lesbian Studies; etc., as well as through various fellowships (Fahrner, Davies, Center for Economic and Environmental Development (CEED), Center for Political Participation (CPP)), and our Bonner Leaders/Bonner Scholars program.

ASSESSMENT (PSRI RESULTS)

The campus leadership team decided to hire a consultant to analyze and summarize the student, faculty and staff PSRI data in a thorough and statistically focused manner. Several criticisms were reported concerning the student and professional survey instruments, the response samples, and an artifact found in the student data. Given the nature of the initial criticisms, it seems important to provide a brief summary of some of those concerns. The issues are perhaps too complex to cover adequately in this report, but a few key concerns centered on the following:

- The two versions (student and professional) of the PSRI are not strictly parallel, therefore direct comparisons between items are likely to be misleading because of differences between response set effects, item context effects, and item order effects.
- Some items are multiple-barreled. Many items ask if the College does A, B and C—such as, “this campus promotes awareness of global social, political, and economic issues.” How do you answer this if you think Allegheny does a great job promoting awareness of global social issues, but not such a great job with global political issues? We can't really know if someone who strongly agrees with the statement strongly agrees that we do all three parts of the statement, or if the one is so well done, they ignore that the others are not so strong.
- Respondents were not randomly drawn from the population, therefore the people responding do not make a random sample, and therefore we cannot conclude the results represent the population.

- Since not all respondents indicated their gender, there was a need to reduce the percent of overall respondents. In some cases, the reduction left such a small sample that the results were questionable (19.9 percent of students for some items).
- There was a wide variation in the number of respondents per item. For example, in the student data, the number ranged from 428 to 529 (after those who didn't indicate a gender were excluded). This large difference brought into further question the potential representativeness of this sample for any single PSRI item for the Allegheny student population.
- There was evidence of an artifact in the student data that revealed a statistically significant correlation between the number of students who responded to an item and the percentage of students who agreed with the item. That is, the more students who responded to an item, the more likely a large percentage of students agreed with the item. In this particular analysis, the 66 items that were positively valued (i.e. agreement is good) were considered, suggesting that any conclusion we might draw from these data would be misleading.

These concerns were strong enough that a recommendation was made that we not disseminate the survey results widely across campus, or use the data to change College policies or programs. However, since Allegheny received PSRI responses from a large number of people (767 students, 299 faculty and staff, 217 alumni, and 64 community partners), the team decided these data could be used to trigger campus discussion, even if we couldn't be confident they accurately reflected the views of campus constituents as a whole.

In an attempt to develop a strategy for using the PSRI data as a basis for campus dialogue, we engaged an emeritus professor to develop an additional analysis aimed at identifying areas where, in the view of those surveyed, Allegheny is doing well in its efforts to meet the Core Commitments' goals and, more importantly, to identify areas in which, from the perspective of one or more of the College's constituencies, the College is not meeting those goals. This [report](#) included summary data from Allegheny's community partners and alumni, in addition to those from students, faculty and staff. Excerpts from the report were presented during a [College dialogue](#) on campus conduct, civility and climate in November 2008. In addition, the report was used to develop a strategy for hosting campus dialogues around key [questions](#) such as how we define work ethic; options for engaging the campus more fully in dialogue around the Core Commitments; ways to get students to think more seriously about personal and academic conduct; and best practices for becoming a community where members feel that it is safe to hold unpopular views.

PROCESS

Throughout the two years of our involvement in Core Commitments, our campus leadership team essentially has remained constant and includes the following individuals:

- Amara Geffen, professor of art, director of the Center for Economic and Environmental Development and chair of Civic Engagement Council - *Team Leader*
- Jacquelyn Kondrot, associate dean for wellness - *Team Leader*
- Dan Shea, professor of political science and director of the Center for Political Participation
- Richard Schindler, professor of art and director of the Values, Ethics and Social Action

Program

David Roncolato, director of Community Service and Service-Learning

Marian Sherwood, director of institutional research

Linda DeMeritt, dean of the College

This team includes representatives from both the academic and student affairs divisions of the College. In assembling our team, we attempted to convene a group of individuals who would work together to achieve common goals, especially focused on enhancing students' curricular and co-curricular learning experiences, both in and outside of the classroom. Throughout the course of our work we identified challenges that grow from a variety of issues, most notably isolation of academic and student affairs division programs, and faculty and staff workload (not to be underestimated). We identified the need for institutional changes that will facilitate development of bridges between faculty and student affairs staff, while fostering mutual respect and an understanding and clarification of how our programs will evolve over time. The Civic Engagement Council (CEC) developed a [mission statement](#), expanded the position of Center for Economic and Environmental Development (CEED) coordinator to include support for CEC collaborative efforts, and developed a plan to use a newly endowed fund to support community engagement efforts.

Additional challenges arose as a result of the autonomy of each of our five primary CEC programs and the desire of each to maintain independence. Our challenge then became how to create integration, while also respecting divisional and programmatic boundaries.

In addition to the team listed above, the following students played a vital role in our efforts:

Brett Fuchs '10, student leader

Carlyn Johnson '10, student leader

Brittany Rechten '10, student leader

Robyn Snelling '09, student leader

Jinnie Templin '10, student leader

Erin Towart '09, student leader

David Valentine '10, student leader

CONSORTIUM INVOLVEMENT

Involvement with the Leadership Consortium provided opportunities for exchange and shared knowledge among team members who attended the Leadership meetings. These individuals gained invaluable knowledge about what other campuses are doing to support, develop and integrate the Core Commitments into campus culture (academic and student affairs). Summer Leadership Institutes provided exposure to seminal literature on Core Commitments and civic engagement programs nationally.

Most important were the individual counseling/advising sessions with AAC&U staff. Beginning in Vermont, we heard that our efforts would remain challenged until we devise a mechanism to bring our academic and student affairs divisions together. While our programs are not isolated entirely, we face many obstacles including the lack of deep understanding of our specific roles and functions and how to share those responsibilities productively. Integration of efforts to teach personal and social responsibility should not lead to total dissolution of specific divisional roles and responsibilities, rather it must first lead to greater understanding of the differences in visions, language, pedagogy and responsibilities, and a deepening of understanding around what each

division can contribute in support of creating the most potent education for the 21st century citizen.

Participation in the leadership consortium has identified best practices at other institutions and provides a unique opportunity for Allegheny to understand and develop its unique approach that will support these goals while respecting the culture of our institution.

PROMISING PRACTICES/ARTIFACTS

Tangible, replicable outgrowths of our work include:

- Development of an EcoReps program that likely will be linked directly to the office of Residence Life. Through this program, our students hope to engage peers as resident advisors (in the dorms) to help initiate programs that support personal, social and environmental responsibility.
- Development of a community pledge to demonstrate commitment to core values. This has been under discussion since the spring semester 2008 and likely will be implemented during matriculation in the fall of 2009. During the 2009-10 academic year, we hope to explore expansion of the pledge to include faculty and staff, and eventually integrate the community pledge into the academic honor code. We also have advocated for a renewal of the College's statement of community.
- Development of a process for generating, selecting and implementing an annual Theme of the Year that provides opportunities for creating connectivity among Civic Engagement Council programs and the broader campus and community programs. This began in 2006-07 with the Allegheny College Climate Change Initiative, which was followed in 2007-08 with the Conference on Race & Whiteness. In 2008-09 we were able to deepen our efforts through Year of Health, and in 2009-10, we will take the next step toward integration and collaboration through the Year of Social Change. We also will begin to plan for the annual theme for the 2010-11 academic year, with the hope that eventually we will be able to connect Theme of the Year content to our Freshman/Sophomore curriculum.
- Development of a campus climate study to help assess and identify institutional changes that are needed to help us create the community we seek to become.
- Evolution of a process for building bridges among key programs and expanding dialogue to establish the greatest degree of community investment and ownership of campus culture and shared responsibility for the creation of a dynamic campus culture that supports the Core Commitments.

PROMISING PRACTICES

Allegheny College has appreciated the opportunity to participate in the Core Commitments program, and we are pleased with the motivation it has provided to improve programs and initiatives campus-wide. We are hopeful that Core Commitments, because of its influence on our strategic planning process, will continue to influence the College in years to come.