

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT COMMITMENT TO SERVICE



Salem State University is fully committed to providing service to the greater community. At her inauguration in 2007, President Patricia Maguire Meservey charged the university to build on its legacy of service to the North Shore region of Massachusetts and beyond. She stated, "It is our duty to ensure that students understand the importance of community involvement, and that they are well versed in the privileges and responsibilities that come with citizenship in a democratic republic."

This commitment to service quickly became Goal Four of the university's strategic plan, which pledges the university to be a principal partner in the cultural, economic and social development of its region. Known as civic engagement on our campus, this area focuses on the development of community service activities and academic service-learning courses for students as well as opportunities for staff and faculty involvement in service. In fact, civic engagement is defined at Salem State as actions designed to strengthen the greater community by identifying and addressing issues of public interest.

The Center for Civic Engagement supports the university's service-learning and community-service initiatives, acting as a liaison to surrounding non-profit and community agencies. Comprised of several areas of the university that are involved in service, the center also serves as a resource and training center for students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The university has additionally participated in the Massachusetts Campus Compact Americorps*VISTA program for the past three years. The focus for each member has coincided with the development of our center with the first member focusing on community service and the following two focusing on service-learning initiatives.

As service efforts increase on campus, so does the commitment of time and resources to the center's growth. In response to this growth, President Meservey established a Civic Engagement Committee that has guided her and the efforts of the center and will define a plan to bring a full-time director on staff to lead the center in the fall of 2013. Currently, administrative responsibilities are shared by administrators in the president's office, student life, and center for teaching innovation as well as a faculty fellow. Faculty, staff and students have been working with external partners for decades and are now, through the internal collaborations with the center and the committee, working together to better meet the needs of the university's partners and the greater community in a more sustainable way.

In September of 2009, President Meservey convened 12 community and government representatives from the North Shore to discuss the university's relationship building initiatives. The result was a continuous dialogue with community representatives around their goals and needs. In the course of this community outreach, we learned that needs of multiple organizations overlapped, including tutoring and youth programming. The university continues work with these organizations and more to address meeting the community's needs in a sustainable way with limited resources.

As we seek to create deeper civic engagement experiences for students, faculty and staff at Salem State, we believe that it is important to prepare and orient students and volunteers to the communities in which they are engaging. These community orientations provide framework for those working in a given area to better understand the issues and allow students to begin thinking more deeply about their work. As a result of these orientations, we hope that students will be more effective and have more fulfilling service experiences.

Another important aspect of orientation is helping those who are going out into the community understand the meaning of civic engagement as a deeper form of working in the community than simply community service. As students, faculty, and staff at Salem State, we are not simply helping the disadvantaged in our region, but are rather engaging in community learning from the people with whom we serve while working to help confront social problems.

Through our outreach, the conditions of the community were also brought into greater light, and the needs of our neighbors became more apparent. One neighborhood that is the focus of several university partnerships is Salem's Point neighborhood. The Point is less than a half mile away from campus and has a population of approximately 3,168 people in a .0257 miles area. Its population density is roughly two-and-a-half times the city of Salem's average. Two-thirds of the Point's residents are Hispanic, and 29.8 percent are living below the poverty level.

Our partnerships with organizations who serve this neighborhood include our work with the Point Neighborhood Association, the North Shore Community Development Coalition, the Greater Salem Boys and Girls Club, and Salem Cyberspace. Through these multiple collaborations we are establishing opportunities for service in a variety of disciplines that include both direct and indirect service to our neighbors. Service in this area has included, but is not limited to, tutoring, youth programming, marketing of available services, image branding for organizations, mapping and discussion around city planning for the area, and various donation collections.

As the university's work increases in the external community, the profile of civic engagement increases on campus. Last year, Salem State inducted its first class into its Civic Engagement Hall of Fame, identifying a student, faculty and staff member who exemplifies what civic engagement means to our campus. The induction ceremony took place at our annual celebration of service event where students, faculty and staff, and at times their community partners, display and discuss their service work from the past year. Held in National Community Service month, this event allows the university and the external community to recognize the importance of civic engagement as well as network to build off of existing partnerships.

Salem State University's commitment to the greater Salem community, the North Shore region, and Massachusetts as a whole is strong and increasing each semester. The more our students, faculty and staff are out in the community, the more partnerships and collaborations are made. In these increasingly difficult economic times, it is our duty as a university to be an active participant in our community and assist in the resolution of issues that impact our region. Through these mutually beneficial partnerships, our students are gaining valuable experience and often an increased awareness of civic responsibility.