

# Present Tense

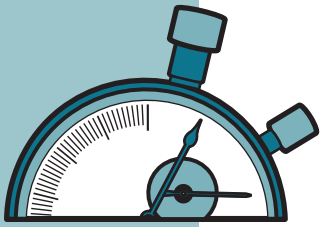
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## Program Review: Service Learning in Post-Katrina New Orleans

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## Program Review: Service Learning in Post-Katrina New Orleans – the Jesuit Way

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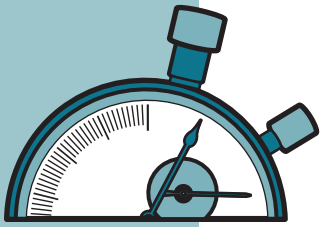
*This article continues a conversation on civic engagement and writing begun in our first issue with [Dr. Jim Dubinsky's review of his program at Virginia Tech](#). Whereas Dubinsky's piece discusses service and the land-grant mission, this article focuses on the Jesuit mission for service and outreach. Both articles describe how civic engagement and writing can be used to respond to tragedy.*

In 2000, the former Superior General of the Jesuit order, Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, S.J., delivered his influential speech, "The Service of Faith and the Promotion of Justice," at Santa Clara University. In his speech, Kolvenbach outlined the meaning of Jesuit education in today's world. Noting the relentless professionalization and marketization of American higher education, Kolvenbach insisted that "what our students want—and deserve—includes but transcends 'worldly success' based on marketable skills. The real measure of our Jesuit universities lies in who our students become." Jesuit education is guided by the ideal of *cura personalis*, the formation of whole persons. In our emerging global reality, Kolvenbach maintained that:

*Persons cannot be whole without  
... a well-educated solidarity ...  
solidarity is learned through 'contact'  
rather than through 'concepts'.  
.. students, in the course of their  
formation, must let the gritty reality*

*of this world into their lives, so they can learn to feel it, think about it critically, respond to its suffering and engage it constructively.*

Following these ideas, many Jesuit universities have become leaders in service learning and community-based learning. It's important to note the distinctive approach here. At many public and private non-sectarian universities, justification for community-based learning models tend to be more or less political: they heighten civic engagement; they lay the groundwork for an active citizenry; and they cultivate social responsibility and other qualities necessary to a thriving democracy.<sup>1</sup> But at Jesuit universities, the task is not just to form better citizens but also to form persons who use the principles of Ignatian spirituality to "perceive, think, judge, choose and act for the rights of others, especially the disadvantaged and the oppressed" (Kolvenbach). By way of this Ignatian imperative, Jesuit universities must pursue moral formation as the proper work of education.<sup>2</sup> Due to this distinctive mission, Loyola University New Orleans has assumed a unique position among the many university-based service learning programs in New Orleans. In this review, I describe Loyola's service learning program and its recent growth in the face of, and in response to, complex challenges and horrible tragedy. My goal is to show how Jesuit values ground and shape our approach to service learning.



### **Mission and History of the Service Learning Program at Loyola**

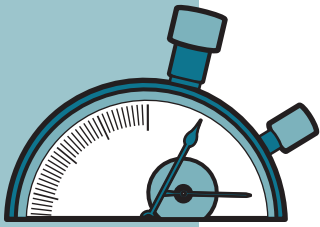
The [Office of Service Learning \(OSL\) at Loyola New Orleans](#) was established in 2001 to implement community-based learning experiences in academic courses and programs of study. Service learning is distinct from co-curricular student service programs at Loyola because it is course-based. Students engage in OSL-supported activities when they enroll in an academic course designated by a professor as a service learning class. Indeed, faculty members are the primary “clients” of OSL. The main purpose of service learning is pedagogical. Ideally, students’ service learning experiences bring classroom learning to life, illuminating or complementing course themes. For example, students in a neuropsychology course may volunteer at a day care center for mentally disabled adults. Here, students can learn firsthand about the functions of various areas of the human brain and the social impacts of mental impairment (e.g., stigmatization, perceived dependence, and asymmetrical relationship formation). Service learning aims to bring classroom topics to life by connecting them to community needs. In this way, service learning enacts the Jesuit mission of *cura personalis*.

Though established in 2001, OSL experienced a three-year transitional period due to Hurricane Katrina. Like all New Orleans universities, Loyola was forced to close for the fall semester of 2005. High turnover among faculty and staff and other urgent university-wide needs compelled the OSL to remain closed when the university reopened in 2006; the OSL didn’t reopen until 2008. However, service learning

activities didn’t stop during this period. On the contrary, Loyola faculty, staff, and students were extremely active—through entrepreneurial and autonomous ways—in connecting teaching and learning activities with pressing needs throughout a city that was, in many respects, torn apart and suffering.

I arrived at Loyola in August 2008 to reorganize and relaunch the OSL. Due to changes in the university and its surrounding community, we had to rebuild the program from scratch. My work has included establishing new community partnerships, overhauling policies and procedures related to service learning, implementing comprehensive assessment, and developing a faculty-centered course development model. During the previous academic year (2009-2010), 802 Loyola students in 61 sections of 50 different courses (representing 16 of 24 academic departments) documented 17,158 hours of service learning at several dozen different partner agencies. In terms of sheer volume, this represents roughly a fourfold increase in service learning activity at Loyola since 2005. Of course, numbers don’t tell the whole story, but they do indicate a dramatic surge in community engagement.<sup>3</sup>

What are some of the main reasons for this dramatic surge? Perhaps most obvious is that universities in post-Katrina New Orleans have become acutely aware that they need to address real-world problems and work toward the public good, lest they become irrelevant.<sup>4</sup> Loyola’s Jesuit mission has fueled this awareness on our campus and has given it a distinct social justice spin. In the Jesuit sense, solidarity is more than simply helping people. It



## Program Review: Service Learning in Post-Katrina

is about understanding and working to correct social systems built and sustained by privilege, wealth, influence, and other forms of social, economic, and cultural power. Solidarity includes confronting forces that dehumanize, marginalize, and oppress human beings. This conviction has uniquely stamped Loyola's community engagement efforts.

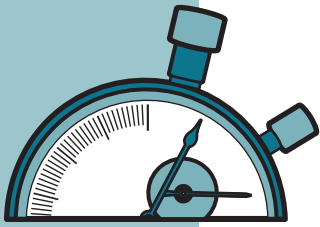
Two other factors contribute to OSL's explosive growth. First, the community enthusiastically welcomed the re-launch of Loyola's service learning program. I have been astounded by the eagerness with which our community partners have embraced our students as regular members of their organizations and the significant amounts of time and energy they've invested in creating meaningful service learning experiences. Second, a dynamic group of faculty members have embraced service learning pedagogy with incredible zest, crafting an ever-increasing array of innovative and thoughtful service learning courses.

### Community Partners

Katrina dramatically altered the physical landscape of New Orleans, and it completely disrupted the nonprofit sector. Many small pre-Katrina nonprofits folded because of relocated staff, lost funds, displaced populations, and destroyed facilities. However, when I came to New Orleans, it struck me that the city had become an incubator for an astounding number of grassroots organizations. Many of these groups were new, but they were also innovative and unorthodox in addressing social problems. Like many "baby" enterprises, they worked with small staffs, low budgets, and meager facilities. For example, partnering

with the [Freret Neighborhood Center](#) (FNC)—a small but dynamic multi-service center established post-Katrina—has been a very different experience from partnering with large, institutionally well-established organizations like the [American Red Cross of Southeast Louisiana](#) or [Catholic Charities](#). The latter groups obviously have more stability, more staff, larger budgets, and established procedures for engaging volunteers—all desirable when establishing long-term service learning relationships. But small, fast-growing, innovative nonprofits like FNC also serve as exciting hands-on laboratories where students immerse themselves in the messy work of social change. For example, FNC has mobilized the most sophisticated grassroots anti-blight campaign in post-Katrina New Orleans by using interactive maps, house-by-house surveys, and an open-source database of troubled properties.<sup>5</sup>

Successfully engaging such a broad spectrum of partners requires close attention to the issue of capacity. Capacity refers to "the extent to which organizations have the knowledge, expertise, resources, policies, procedures, programs and systems to effectively manage volunteers" (Machin and Paine 10). Universities can overwhelm agencies with more volunteers than they can handle. Service learners can also become a burden rather than an asset to an agency if they aren't targeted toward the right tasks. It helps to remember the often huge disparities in resources and power between universities and grassroots community-based organizations. Being honest about our own capacity is equally important. Some questions we ask include the following: Do we have a sufficient supply of service learning



## Kelly Brotzman

courses to meet community-identified needs? Do our students possess needed skills? Do universities risk over-promising and under-delivering if they form too many partnerships or attempt to partner with agencies whose needs they can't reasonably meet? Candid conversations about capacity have helped cultivate healthy partnerships characterized by mutual respect and reciprocal benefits.

One example of mutual respect and reciprocity is Loyola's [memorandum of understanding](#) (MOU), a formal agreement between Loyola and its community partners. Such documents risk becoming mountains of incomprehensible legalese. Worse, some service learning MOUs read as if the university is dictating terms to the community partner rather than outlining mutual responsibilities. In my experience, documents like this often do more harm than good; they spoil a golden opportunity to lay the groundwork for productive, mutually beneficial collaborations. Our goals in crafting our MOU were (1) keep it short; (2) utilize plain English over legalese as much as possible; (3) spell out candidly what we expect of our partners and what they can expect of us, mindful of the investment both parties are making; *and* (4) allow community partners to suggest their own additions and revisions. We have found that these goals succeeded in making our MOU a "living" document, which is not only read but consulted and interpreted throughout the course of our relationships with community partners.

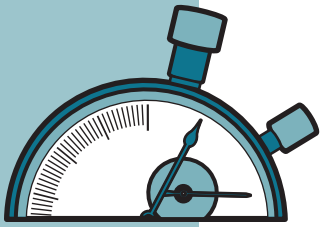
Another example of our attempt at open and honest communication is our Community Partners Council (CPC). The CPC includes eight community partners

who meet with me quarterly to provide feedback and advice on how Loyola's service learning program can best meet community needs. Community Partners Council meetings take place off-campus, usually at a community gathering place or local business, which helps "decenter" the relationship. Too often, community partners must come to university turf to attend meetings. They fight for limited parking spots and search for obscure conference rooms. This can compound a common frustration in service learning: who is serving whom, and on whose terms? I see our community partners as colleagues and guides. I need their wisdom to provide effective leadership to Loyola's service learning program. Our CPC meetings are more candid when we meet in the community rather than at Loyola.

Sometimes, community partners don't see themselves as equal stakeholders in service learning. They see themselves as recipients of fickle, possibly temporary goodwill. Community partners may have been influenced to perceive themselves in this way by larger and better-resourced institutions who fund them (or don't), by government agencies who regulate (or obstruct) their work, or by universities who allege to "help" them. By emphasizing candor and mutuality in communication, we try to help our partners empower themselves as co-educators and assume an institutional stance of cooperative solidarity rather than paternalistic benevolence (or worse, self-aggrandizement).

### Faculty

Another reason for the explosive growth in Loyola's service learning program over the last three years is the innovation and



## Program Review: Service Learning in Post-Katrina

energy of our faculty. Approximately 60% of our faculty members are new since Katrina. This is astonishing. In addition, most faculty who use service learning in their courses are either (a) new professors, (b) new to Loyola, or (c) new to service learning pedagogy—or some combination of these. This has led to an exciting atmosphere of enthusiasm and experimentation around service learning.

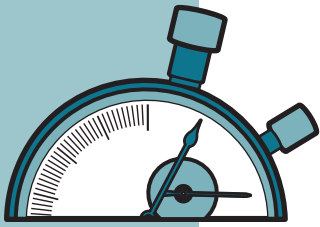
Our approach to faculty relations emphasizes choice. Sometimes faculty members fear that incorporating service learning will create a heavy load of bureaucracy and logistical problem solving. While there will always be some paperwork, transportation planning, etc., I collaborate with faculty in flexible ways that support them and their pedagogical vision. Also, there are no across-the-board service learning graduation requirements; faculty members aren't "forced" into service learning. Faculty members choose service learning because they believe it will enhance their course, not because they need to fulfill a university requirement—we focus on *quality* rather than *quantity*. Concentrating on composing high-impact, exciting service learning courses has led to more and better growth than focusing on volume and raw numbers.

Faculty members are free to choose the service learning model best suited to their course. If they choose a service learning *project*, students work together to complete specific tasks for a single partner agency chosen in advance. Projects are guided by a written agreement specifying deliverables, timelines, and responsibilities. Projects are ideal when courses have highly specific topics (e.g., interactive theater

or Haitian history) or when agencies have indirect service needs that do not require regular presence at the agency (e.g., survey development, research, media materials, or curriculum design). Faculty members may also choose the *placement* model, where students volunteer regularly at a variety of pre-approved partner agencies. Placements are ideal when courses have relatively broad topics (such as social psychology or expository writing) or when agencies have direct service needs (such as tutoring, client intake, or meal preparation). Because OSL supports both models, service learning looks different from course to course, and faculty members aren't constricted to a single paradigm.

Faculty members have many other choices. They choose whether service learning activities will be required or optional for students, and if necessary, what the non-service learning alternative will be (e.g., a research paper, a series of homework assignments, etc). Also, faculty members choose the community partner(s) with whom they will work. For service learning placements, faculty members decide how many hours their students will serve. Finally, faculty members determine how much weight service learning will carry in course grades. While OSL has many established procedures and tools (including rubrics for evaluating students' performance and timesheets for recording service hours), our faculty members have considerable freedom to create the service learning experience best suited to their course.

This freedom represents a form of *cura personalis* for both professors and students. Many have noted that

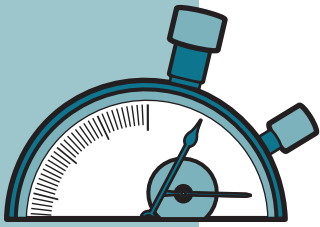


Ignatian spirituality “emphasizes interior freedom.”<sup>6</sup> Careful reflection and discernment—the hallmarks of mature Ignatian spirituality—do not apply a simplistic, uniform rubric to all situations. Good choices must first of all be fully free choices, and second, they must also be responsive to the variety of particular circumstances affecting a situation. Further, Jesuit spirituality has what I call an invitational spirit rather than a spirit of compulsory obligation. This posture has greatly informed our approach to service learning: we invite faculty members and students to experience what service learning can offer, and we embrace the variety of forms service learning can take.

There are a host of other reasons for the explosive growth in service learning at Loyola over the last three years and since Katrina ravaged New Orleans, but I believe our relationships with faculty and community partners are the most significant. Ultimately, these relationships reflect Loyola’s Jesuit roots. Kolvenbach insisted that Jesuit universities must “take conscious responsibility for being a force for faith and justice.” They must live *in* and *for* a social reality, shedding intelligence upon it and using their influence to transform it (Kolvenbach). For students, faculty, and staff at Loyola, this “social reality” has been the wildly difficult and beautiful rebirth of a great American city. Service learning has provided a way for the Loyola community to embrace Kolvenbach’s call and participate in the all-encompassing work of *cura personalis*.

## Endnotes

1. See, for example, the [Morrill Act](#) of 1862 establishing land-grant schools.
2. By contrast, Stanley Fish (*Save the World on Your Own Time*) maintains that educators should not try to instill ethics or improve people, lest they stray from their proper expertise. For Fish, educators’ expertise is “introduc[ing] students to bodies of knowledge and traditions of inquiry ... and equip[ping] those same students with the analytical skills... that will enable them to move confidently within those traditions and to engage in independent research” (12-13).
3. This increase in participation is one reason Loyola recently appeared on [U.S. News & World Report’s](#) list of the top 30 service-learning programs and received the [Carnegie Foundation’s community engagement classification](#). The Carnegie community engagement classification “describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Carnegie). It is awarded to universities that provide evidence of a university-wide culture of excellence in community engagement. In addition to OSL, there is an amazing array of other centers and institutes at Loyola that engage the community—everything from jazz education to small business development.



## Program Review: Service Learning in Post-Katrina

4. For example, Loyola's next-door neighbor, Tulane University, implemented an [across-the-board public service graduation requirement](#) after Katrina. This requirement mandates that all students take one introductory service learning course during their first two years at Tulane. During their final two years, students must complete an advanced public-service experience (either a second service learning course, or a public service internship, research project, study abroad opportunity, or capstone experience).

5. Blight is widespread in New Orleans. According to the [Greater New Orleans Community Data Center](#), it is a problem that cannot be solved by the market alone (GNOCDC). Reducing blight has been identified as a top priority of Mayor Mitch Landrieu's administration.

6. See "Ten Elements of Ignatian Spirituality" at [IgnatianSpirituality.com](#).

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