

The Ville

Leah Sweetman

Assistant Director for Service-Learning,
Center for Service and Community Engagement
Saint Louis University

Bryan Sokol

Director, Center for Service and Community Engagement
Saint Louis University

Saint Louis University (SLU) is a Catholic, Jesuit institution with campuses in St. Louis, Missouri, and Madrid, Spain. Founded in 1818, SLU was the first university west of the Mississippi River. The University is home to nearly 8,600 undergraduates and 4,800 graduate students (including medical and law students) from all 50 states and more than 75 countries. The St. Louis campus is located in the Midtown neighborhood, within the city's arts district and five minutes from the Gateway Arch on the Mississippi Riverfront.

Saint Louis University's commitment to community engagement and service is a widely recognized strength of the institution. From record-setting participation in collegiate "Make A Difference Day" events to national recognition from the Department of Education and the Corporation for National Community Service for promoting volunteerism, SLU holds a long list of accolades acknowledging its "culture of service." Such a culture follows naturally from its Jesuit mission and identity. Serving others has been central to the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits, since being founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1534.

The Ville

SLU has been heavily involved in service activities in the historic neighborhood known as the Ville for many years. These activities have been built from many of the existing strengths of the neighborhood, particularly faith-based organizations like St. Matthew the Apostle Catholic Church, which serves as a neighborhood hub. While once a thriving community, the Ville is now one of the more distressed areas of St. Louis.

The Ville is a neighborhood in north St. Louis, about 1.5 miles north of SLU's main campus. For

years, the Ville had been a center of African American culture, and home to many black professionals, businesses, and entertainers. Today, this neighborhood is approximately 98% African American. Census data for the City of St. Louis shows a racially divided city, with many neighborhoods a mirror image of the Ville, particularly on the city's south side (see Manhattan Institute for Policy Research). In fact, the disparities between north and south St. Louis have been called "the Delmar Divide," based on the street which serves as an invisible boundary cutting through the city. Table 1 provides a demographic snapshot of the Ville neighborhood, as compared to both the city and the surrounding metropolitan area.

Table 1: Demographics of the Ville Neighborhood as Compared to St. Louis City-Wide Data and Metropolitan Area Data

		The Ville Neighborhood, St. Louis (Census Tract)	St. Louis City	St. Louis Metropolitan Statistical Area
Median Household Income	2010	16,654	33,652	53,227
	2013	21,776	34,582	54,463
Pct. Below Poverty Level	2010	31.5%	26.0%	11.9%
	2013	38.0%	27.4%	13.1%
Pct. Owner-Occupied Houses	2010	40.3%	37.6%	64.8%
	2013	30.8%	35.7%	63.3%
Median House Value (Owner-Occupied House)	2010	60,700	122,200	159,800
	2013	48,600	119,200	158,100
Pct. Vacant Housing	2010	24.3%	20.3%	9.8%
	2013	41.3%	19.9%	10.0%
Pct. High School Diploma/ Equivalency (≥ 25 years)	2010	74.8%	81.2%	88.6%
	2013	78.8%	83.3%	90.2%
Pct. of Population – < 18 Years Old	2010	28.4%	22.3%	24.3%
	2013	27.7%	20.9%	23.5%
Pct. of Population – 18 - 54 Years Old	2010	41.2%	56.3%	51.3%
	2013	41.6%	56.6%	50.2%
Pct. of Population – ≥ 55 Years Old	2010	30.5%	21.4%	24.5%
	2013	30.7%	22.6%	26.3%
Pct. of Population – White	2010	3.7%*	46.0%*	79.1%*
	2013	0.6%	47.0%*	79.1%*
Pct. of Population – Black	2010	98.8%*	51.3%*	18.8%*
	2013	98.5%	50.0%	18.9%*
Pct. of Population – Other Race	2010	0.9%*	5.3%*	4.0%*
	2013	0.9%*	5.7%*	4.3%*
Pct. of Population – Hispanic	2010	0.0%	3.3%	2.4%
	2013	0.0%	3.6%	2.6%

Data from American Community Survey 5 Year Estimates (<http://factfinder.census.gov/>)

*ACS Percentage Estimates added up to more than 100%

Although owner-occupied housing is generally consistent with ownership levels of the city, there are significant disparities when compared to the broader region. Census Bureau reports indicated 38% of the population in the Ville live below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). The median values of the homes in the neighborhood are much lower and have continued to decrease over time.

Although the Ville has experienced decline, it contains a variety of strong community organizations working to stabilize and revitalize the neighborhood. Saint Louis University is committed to partnering with many of these agencies, both as a way to enhance their work and to build stronger community-based scholarly efforts. A few of these organizations and partnerships are highlighted next.

University-Community Partnerships

In the Ville, there is a Jesuit-sponsored Catholic church, where SLU students volunteer. There is a middle school, as well as youth and neighborhood-serving nonprofit organizations, all of which host student volunteers and engage SLU faculty. There is also an intentional living-and-learning community that is in the process of developing a deeper relationship with SLU.

La Salle Middle School

Formerly De La Salle Middle School, a Catholic coeducational middle school, La Salle is now a public charter school located in the Ville. The school reaches out to families in the neighborhood and beyond. La Salle is committed to transforming children and the community through innovative education. The small school operates on a year-round calendar and has an extended school-day program, with additional faith-based programming through its partner, EnCompass. La Salle school staff have worked closely with both the church and other local community organizations, and have generated numerous volunteers for the school. Many volunteers are students, faculty, and staff from SLU, serving especially as tutors, mentors, and after-school program leaders.

St. Matthew the Apostle Catholic Church

St. Matthew's has been present in the neighborhood for more than 100 years. Over the past two decades, the church has raised tremendous financial resources to renovate the church building itself, the rectory, and its parish center. Leaders from the church have engaged residents on the block to discuss social problems in the neighborhood. Church leaders and volunteers have also worked in the neighborhood to make physical improvements and help stabilize the area. In the area surrounding the church, 87% of the Catholic population have abandoned the city since 1950 (St. Matthew the Apostle Catholic Church, 1997). In the late 1990s, the church defined several goals in its revitalization project. Three of those goals included enhancing the livability of the neighborhood, establishing more housing for those in need, and securing access to stable employment opportunities. Currently, La Salle Middle School resides in the renovated parish center, which is now a multi-use facility that contains a kitchen, dining room, gymnasium, and several classrooms and offices. Many functions take place there, including community meetings and events, fundraisers, youth sporting events, and other recreational programs.

Revitalization 2000, Inc.

This community organization was started by members of the St. Matthew's Church who were interested in neighborhood revitalization efforts, including housing, community development, and youth programming. The organization works closely with both the school and the church. Volunteers serve as youth mentors, board members, landscapers, and neighborhood program leaders. The youth and mentors mow lawns and provide general landscaping for 90 properties in the neighborhood. Revitalization 2000, Inc., also owns Claver House, an intentional, faith-based community. Over the years, several Saint Louis University faculty, staff, and students have lived in Claver House. This residential community is dedicated to service in the neighborhood, getting to know the neighbors and local children, including those who attend St. Matthew's Church and La Salle Middle School.

Community Garden

More than 15 years ago, Revitalization 2000, Inc., helped demolish a structurally unstable building to create the initial area for the garden. The garden on the block provides space for the volunteer efforts of people involved with St. Matthew's Church and Revitalization 2000, Inc. The garden has also provided an outdoor classroom for La Salle. Over the years, students from Saint Louis University have led several youth programs in the garden.

This particular block, and those immediately adjacent, have a larger number of institutions for providing human services and outreach than most city blocks. In addition to the institutions described above, there is a St. Louis Metropolitan Fire Department Station House next to Claver House. Additional providers in the immediate area are the Northside Youth and Senior Center, Inc.; Myrtle Hilliard Davis Comprehensive Health Center at Homer G. Phillips (a former, prominent African American hospital); Annie Malone Children and Family Service Center; Northside Community Housing Inc.; and the Tandy Park Recreation Center. Many of these institutions were established several decades ago and have historic significance to the Ville. Newer efforts and programs are emerging all the time. Readers 2 Leaders is one of these emerging programs, initiated by SLU and partnering organizations.

Readers 2 Leaders

Readers 2 Leaders is a peer-mentoring, reading partnership between 7th and 8th grade students at La Salle Middle School in north St. Louis and 3rd grade students at St. Gabriel the Archangel Elementary School in south St. Louis. The partnership, which began in May 2011, is led by Saint Louis University's Center for Service and Community Engagement. St. Matthew the Apostle Church had begun a "sibling parish" relationship with St. Gabriel the Archangel Church several years before.

Readers 2 Leaders' curricular content consists mainly of reading picture books about prominent African American leaders and innovators in U.S. history and discussing the particular virtues contributing to their leadership skills. The program activities involve cooperative learning exercises and small group reading opportunities led by the older student mentors (i.e., the program's "leaders") of La Salle Middle School. These activities occur twice a week over an 8-week period, timed mostly during February's "Black History Month."

Although building literacy, civic understanding, and leadership qualities are important goals of the program, its real merits emerge from the relationships being forged between the diverse groups of student participants and the different institutions involved in the collaboration. While Readers 2 Leaders may resemble many other “reading buddy” programs, it is unique in its structure and guiding principles. At the specific level of the students and on the broader school (institutional) level, the most important of these principles has been an attempt to reverse the power imbalances and negative stereotypes associated with racial divisions and tensions in the city of St. Louis.

La Salle Middle School and St. Gabriel Elementary School are situated in different parts of the city and serve very different student bodies. La Salle serves a predominantly African American student population coming from an economically depressed and highly transitional community on the north side of the city. In contrast, St. Gabriel serves a predominantly Caucasian (white) student population coming from an economically stable, middle-to-upper class community on the south side of the city. Although the strengths and needs of these two schools are different, when they work together in a partnership they complement or balance each other. In short, these school communities are “better together,” which is another guiding principle applied throughout the program’s development. The teachers and administrators at the former De La Salle expressed the need for appropriate service and leadership opportunities for their students, while St. Gabriel’s staff expressed a need to promote awareness of diversity and multiculturalism among its students. Accordingly, the program curriculum is designed to empower students, based on the complementing strengths they each possess, and the students grow stronger as they work together and develop friendships.

Saint Louis University’s Support and Time Commitment

Over the past five years of Readers 2 Leaders program development and subsequent implementation, SLU students, staff, and volunteers have contributed 1,150 hours to the participating students. The program has involved 35 student volunteers (both graduate and undergraduate) who have contributed 675 hours. Five SLU staff from the Center for Service and Community Engagement have contributed the remaining 475 hours.

Each year the program involves 10 to 12 meetings between the elementary school and middle school students. In Years 1 through 4, the program has yielded a total of 55 contact hours for 275 children. Based on SLU’s overall time investment in the program, this translates to over 20 hours of work by staff or volunteers for each hour of contact between the school children. Based on the number of school children participating in the program, SLU’s time commitment has been roughly 4 hours per child.

Outcomes

School students have described the program in the following ways:

People who are different from each other become friends because they see that they are different and unique from each other. At Readers 2 Leaders, I became friends because they wanted to be friends with me. (De La Salle student)

Everyone can be friends, even if they have different skin color. (St. Gabriel student)

I've learned that you should stay true to yourself and never give up and always do the right thing. You should always stand up and tell the person what you think is right. (St. Gabriel student)

The virtue that helps me be a good leader is courage. It feels good to make others happy and feel good. Readers 2 Leaders helped me with leadership qualities because I was the teacher for the first time. (De La Salle student)

More formal assessment has explored the impact of the program with pre- and post- measures analysis, finding that attitudes and perceptions related to race were neutralized, allowing for more powerful lessons to be learned about virtue and character in the relationships that formed during the program. The essential core concept: individuals should be judged on the content of their character, not the color of their skin. These findings have been presented by graduate students on the assessment team at various scholarly conferences, including the Association for Moral Education, the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement, the National Catholic Educational Association, and the Jean Piaget Society. In addition, several regional news outlets—the local NBC and CBS affiliates, as well as the St. Louis Post-Dispatch newspaper—have also highlighted the program and its positive impact on race-relations in the community.

University and Community Context

Beyond the community-based, human or social capital that students, teachers, and staff have contributed as part of Readers 2 Leaders, the program has drawn much of its financial support and resources from SLU's Center for Service and Community Engagement. The Center for Service and Community Engagement was founded to create a coordinated interface between the University and the urban communities that surround it, seeking ultimately to prepare others to be effective servant leaders and agents for social change. In accordance with the University's mission, the Center works to foster the creation of a just and equitable society. Readers 2 Leaders has become an important part of meeting these objectives while at the same time contributing to SLU's growing K-12 educational outreach.

Currently, Readers 2 Leaders operates as a partnership between two schools and has been structured according to the particular student demographics at each. While Readers 2 Leaders is perhaps unique in the way that it responds to the strengths and needs of these different school communities, other similar demographic profiles can be found in a host of other schools throughout the St. Louis region. Readers 2 Leaders was ultimately designed to demonstrate best practices in bridging communities across racial and socio-economic boundaries, and to show the value of strength-based learning partnerships that bring together diverse groups. Although the city of St. Louis is often maligned for its social problems, the Readers 2 Leaders program has allowed a marginalized pocket of the city to emerge as a service leader and demonstrate the positive impact of capacity-building efforts rooted in the unique strengths of communities.

Conclusion

Saint Louis University will continue working in the Ville with St. Matthew the Apostle Catholic Church and other related organizations on the block, including Revitalization 2000, Inc. SLU is working on strengthening the partnership with Revitalization 2000 and requesting additional SLU students to live in the Claver House Community. This more formal partnership will pro-

vide housing, community formation, and engaged service opportunities for students. A number of students and faculty continue to deepen their relationships with the Ville, serving on committees and boards of directors of the local organizations, participating in workshops and community-based efforts of St. Matthew's Church, and mentoring youth through a number of local organizations.

Saint Louis University has created the North St. Louis Initiative, bringing together University faculty with ongoing partnerships with community organizations in the north St. Louis area. SLU, with its urban location, Jesuit tradition and mission, commitment to social justice, and history of service to the underserved, is in many ways uniquely positioned to address social, economic, education, and health disparities that exist in north St. Louis. Over the last several years, faculty, staff, and students have met to coordinate the work SLU does in north St. Louis city and county. These partnerships have resulted in numerous community-based research projects, grant awards, presentations, and publications. The North St. Louis Initiative recognizes numerous ongoing partnerships among faculty, students, community organizations, and residents of the Ville. With a new Strategic Plan in place, Saint Louis University is wholly committed as an institution to experiential learning, community engagement, and engaged scholarship (see *Magis*, <http://www.slu.edu/strategicplan>). All of the efforts reported here are illustrative of this commitment.

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Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge Peter Marle, Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Psychology, Saint Louis University, for his assistance in preparing this case study. We would also like to thank our Readers 2 Leaders partners for their continued support, including teachers and administrators at La Salle Middle School and St. Gabriel the Archangel Catholic School, St. Louis.

Authors

Leah Sweetman, Ph.D., is the Assistant Director for Service Learning in the Center for Service and Community Engagement at Saint Louis University. She has a research interest in using service learning as a vehicle for creating social change and has developed workshops and presentations on this topic for faculty, students, and community partners.

Bryan Sokol, Ph.D., is the Director of the Center for Service and Community Engagement at Saint Louis University. He is also an associate professor and researcher in the Department of Psychology. His research team investigates the factors associated with positive youth development, particularly aspects of young persons' social cognition, emotional competence, moral character, and identity.