

St. Mary's Day of Service

An Independent Sustainability Project

Submitted for Consideration to Professor Barry Muchnick

For ENST 450: Applied Sustainability Practicum

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### **Executive Summary**

One of the defining principles of the St. Mary's community, as stated in the St. Mary's Way, is a culture of community service. Whether this is a characteristic of the college or a goal for it, there is not sufficient participation on campus to support this ideal. Awareness of service opportunities is presently limited by a lack of visibility. Enhanced publicity of service events both around campus and online would cultivate awareness, but more could be done to cultivate interest. Service provides an opportunity for action and socialization, and I would emphasize that in promoting a campus-wide day of community service. For this event, student clubs and staff departments would organize several separate and interdisciplinary on- and off-campus service opportunities. This event would strengthen community bonds and provide academic enrichment, giving real-world context to abstract issues affecting our community. I am working with the Office of Orientation and Service Activities to plan this event for April 2016. I hope that it becomes a popular annual event and that it strengthens appreciation service and its benefits.

## **‘Introduction**

There are many ways to interpret what it means for an individual to be a “good” person, though they generally relate to how one interacts with others. A good person could be polite or be actively philanthropic or fall somewhere in between. In a college student’s busy schedule, it is easy to consistently push active demonstrations of generosity below more individually urgent priorities. While a “spirit of caring and an ethic of service” is part of the St. Mary’s Way, acts of service are not visibly part of campus culture, rather a tendency restricted to certain niches on campus (“St. Mary’s Way”). If this school wants to live up to its proclaimed goals and its potential impacts, acts of service need to be both more widespread and more visible.

Many schools nationwide have an annual event which celebrates and advertises their commitments to service, while providing a host of benefits to the schools and their respective communities (“Day of Service;” “Day of Service in Honor;” “Organizer’s Toolbox”). I seek to organize a campus-wide day of service, on and off campus, in which several groups undertake service activities with a variety of foci. Such projects would extend beyond traditional ideas of sustainability, as they would be more heavily weighted towards social considerations than typical environmental initiatives. Benefits also extend to cultivating more well-rounded, satisfied and enriched members at St. Mary’s - not just students (“Integrating Community Service;” “Active Citizenship”). Through ample promotion and partnership with a variety of clubs and other groups on campus, buildup to such an event would provide a social incentive for service, which could facilitate community involvement among those who do not typically do so and provide a positive experience which makes service a voluntary, continuing event for more people on campus.

## Context

On a college campus, an academic building is any building which houses lectures, labs and professors, which implicitly excludes any other building as not academic and not contributory to student academic experience. Learning experiences are not confined to a classroom, but such alternative methods are presently underemphasized as part of a holistic academic experience (Orr, *Earth in Mind*). While service may not be generally performed for academic enrichment, it is a powerful educational tool as it gives an individual context in which they can challenge their actions and beliefs. (Markus et al., "Integrating Community Service"). It also gives context and a point of reference to elucidate understanding of issues such as poverty, pollution and privilege while also addressing them by working with community members (Parker et al., "Citizenship and Community"). A student's overall academic experience at a liberal arts institution ought to be more focused on shaping their role as a member of society in a more transformative and sustainable role (Hutchinson, "Toward a Twenty-First Century").

Sustainability is a widely misunderstood concept. Many believe that its sustainability is purely about conserving endangered species and using fluorescent lightbulbs, but there is so much more. The general working definition for sustainability is being able to meet people's needs both now and in the future ("Our Common Future"). This broad definition requires broad approaches. Sustainability focuses on social concerns in the context of their physical environment; sustainability focuses on economic concerns in the context of the physical and social environment (Giddings et al., "Environment, Economy and Society"). Presently, service is not often linked to sustainability and, considering the social and economic benefits which can be derived from service, it is surprising how small the body of literature linking the two subjects is.

However, service is an important tool for advancing moral concerns related to sustainability and service is essential for a well-rounded, sustainable education (Moore, “Seven Recommendations;” Sipos et al., “Achieving Transformative Sustainability Learning”). Service addresses and increases understanding of community issues and addresses the moral concerns which are inextricably tied to sustainability (Burkhardt, “The Morality Behind Sustainability”). If you have the opportunity to assist another person in a state of need or disempowerment and you do not, it is immoral and thus not sustainable.

The isolated bubble of a rural college campus limits interaction with the community and the issues which affect it. Service clubs on the St. Mary’s campus approach a variety of issues, including political activism, racial and sexual disparities and homelessness - all issues which relate to sustainability. Service events would help address a variety of local needs, as determined by local groups who have the best knowledge of their needs. Student provision of resources also frees up financial resources for these groups to address other needs. As it stands, students often perceive St. Mary’s as being “in the middle of nowhere,” which means that there is not anything important or relevant happening in our environment. Establishing local context could increase appreciation of our human and nonhuman surrounding communities and their concerns and problems. Such a partnership could reduce the St. Mary’s bubble and improve our working relationship with our community.

While participatory learning is heavily weighted in elementary education, it is largely overlooked in later stages of education (Stanton, “Liberal Arts, Experiential Learning”). There are groups in schools which are organized around action in the community, but they are wholly separate from academic departments. There are already individuals involved in community service on campus, but rarely is it actively linked to education. Pairing the two, either in an

academic or social context, will greatly enhance the benefits derived from service and willingness to serve, creating an atmosphere in which service and learning mutually enhance each other (Sigmon, "Linking Service with Learning"). One method of provoking critical analysis of an individual's relationship with serviced is proposed by Robert Sigmon, who suggests asking people three questions, giving them time to think and discuss after each:

- How have other people served you?
- How have you served other people?
- How have you served yourself?

Upon reflection, people often realize how selfishly they act, even as so many other people acted to help them. People then feel they should act more selflessly, enhancing desire to serve, which is part of the ideal of liberal arts.

One of the major reasons for choosing the liberal arts style of education is as an alternative to the traditional, career-minded university. People tend to be most socially active around college age, therefore it is optimal to capitalize on this and create a wealth of service opportunities, hopefully creating students who make service a lifelong activity (Barber and Battisoni, "A Season of Service"). Liberal arts is supposed to prepare students for more than employment and help cultivate intellectual, critically thinking individuals, understanding of the moral and social issues happening in their communities. Pairing this philosophy with community service allows students to also play a role in addressing these issues while simultaneously learning more through experience. While the insights gained are less tangible than test scores, they are far more meaningful. Service can be a vehicle through which to address dwindling national interest in an understanding of political and social issues (Sieder et al., "The Impact of Community Service"). However, to make such changes on the scale of an entire school, there

must be an administrative paradigm shift in perception of educational goals, and before that, there must be a general interest from the campus community in doing so. Large-scale, noticeable involvement in service within the campus community paired with a focus on learning could serve as a grassroots initiative for larger institutional changes.

Unfortunately, there are limitations to willingness to participate in service. One of the strongest is an individual's past experience, or lack thereof, with service; community service is generally done by people who have done it before (Hyde and Knowles, "What Predicts Australian"). Service activities can be specifically designed to be most appealing to casual participants. Common limiting factors include time, financial commitment and awareness of opportunities, therefore an effective way to attract new volunteers would be to organize and publicize an event for which volunteers need only commit a relatively small amount of time. Organizers must, in addition to making service not seem burdensome, make service appealing. Encouraging performing service with friends both increases the number of participants and improves positive perception of the activity undertaken. Individuals must also have interest in performing the activity; organization of several separate activities gives participants a greater number of potential niches and increases the likelihood that they will be interested in a service activity. A campus-wide effort to simultaneously undertake several different community service activities fulfill the criteria laid out by this study and meets the goal of a widely visible service activity which could facilitate institutional change.

### **Case Studies**

This project seeks to cultivate an environment conducive to widespread participation in service activities without mandating it. In 2004, California state universities collectively attempted to incorporate service into the curriculum ("Testimony Regarding CPR

Recommendation ETV33”). There was a recommendation that all students be required to perform a minimum amount of community service as a precondition of graduation; a panel decided to reject this proposal for a host of reasons, though one is of particular interest. While such an initiative would have increased overall time spent doing community service, the panel concluded that a mandate would properly incentivize community service. An academic institution seeks to cultivate a certain type of student with certain tendencies. This initiative's goal was not to facilitate service, but rather interest in service, which requires a different approach. A mandate is too authoritarian to cultivate interest in generosity (“Testimony Regarding CPR Recommendation ETV33”). An effective effort requires an approach which feels more personal and one in which an individual decides to participate, rather than having it decided for him.

Yale has perhaps the most notable collegiate day of service; this past year, it was overseen by Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor (“Organizer’s Toolbox”). This event has become well-established enough to take place on a global scale, which is helpful because it means that there is a clear organizational structure with easily accessible resources on how to organize events and how to participate, tools which can be modified to meet fit St. Mary’s. Provided literature thoroughly lays out broad strokes of planning such an event and benefits which it would provide, some of which were not previously considered. Below is a summarized version of their planning timeline, which could be highly similar to our prospective timeline considering both events would take place at the same time of year (“Organizer’s Toolbox”):

- September-November: Encourage club participation and publicity within club. Begin to identify service sites and their respective event leaders.
- January-February: Confirmation of site and club participation.

- March: Beginning of promotion for service events and participant registration.
- April: Continued outreach. May need to add more sites if one has reached cap of volunteers.
- May: Confirm final project details. Make participants aware of necessary logistical concerns. Perform service event and post about it on social media.
- Follow up: Thank participants, event leaders and service sites.

The only major difference between the event at Yale and the prospective event at St. Mary's is that Yale largely works with alumni and St. Mary's would largely work with students. While we would like to encourage participation early, it is not as necessary to have as much advance notice for a group of college students. This event partners with groups which normally perform community service, therefore it is not seeking to make these groups do something they don't normally do; instead, this event seeks to coordinate several different groups to serve simultaneously to maximize niches for potential participants. Organizing service events which have been done before eliminates any concern about whether groups select events which could reasonably be undertaken by student volunteers in a day.

In addition, part of cultivating interest in service requires its advertising as a positive, social experience; the Yale Day of Service suggests an end-of-day picnic or cookout-type event ("Organizer's Toolbox"). With the allure of free food, this gathering gives everyone who participated a chance to see the scale and diversity of overall participation, in terms of both people and projects. This gathering allows organizers to promote the benefits of both the events undertaken throughout the day and the benefits of service in general. Our event would be centralized around our campus and such a gathering would invite all local participants to one

event. An alternative reflective gathering could just involve some brief speeches for organizers; this would be easier to organize, but would not spark as much interest in attendance.

Smaller scale projects which would be more reasonable to attempt to emulate would be days of service at Gettysburg College and Dickinson College. Both have more similarly sized students bodies with a heavy focus on local projects and local interactions, though the two have different approaches to service. Gettysburg rallies student interest in honor of a late former student whom they uplift as an individual with an exemplary commitment to selflessness and service, which provides a powerful example for students to follow (“Day of Service in Honor”). Gettysburg was more focused on the educational value of service; the event both began and ended with lecture and discussion about the importance of service. In addition to a service activity, all volunteers participated in a “poverty simulation,” a role-playing experience about the difficulties of living in poverty. This event setup has a lot of educational benefit, but does not come across as fun, limiting potential participation.

Dickinson, on the other hand, emphasizes the fun side. Their literature begins by mentioning that their most popular event was Wii Bowling at a senior home. It attempts to make service sound appealing and not burdensome. Dickinson acknowledges limitations of scheduling for individuals with such a busy lifestyle as a college student and therefore emphasizes how their projects are just a few hours of commitment, short enough to be able to fit into a full schedule, while still addressing community needs (“Day of Service”). The day of service only includes the separate service events, and not an inclusive group event or any additional educational material. St. Mary’s could draw an overarching approach for how to organize a day of community service from these two examples depending on what is prioritized - namely, education or participation. These two events also both list how many projects were undertaken on a given day of service,

which would provide a baseline for how many could feasibly be undertaken at a college of similar size. For recent days of service, Gettysburg had seven listed projects while Dickinson had nine listed projects, therefore it would be best to limit such an event to a similar number of projects, maybe a couple more. After the first year, future organizers could gauge student interest from the first event and re-estimate what would be feasible in future years.

### **Project Overview and Projected Outcomes**

My project seeks to organize a single day on which service-oriented clubs on campus organize an event within their area of interest that in some way serves the local community. I am largely focusing my initial efforts on working with clubs due to existing social relationships within individual groups and existing partnerships that groups have with various off-campus groups. There will also be an effort to include such groups as academic departments, physical plant and alumni groups, so as to make an event which is not just a student event, but a St. Mary's community event. While the goal is to have a diversity of niches of service activity, it is necessary to ensure that this effort does not simply maximize available service options, because it would be both futile and embarrassing if there were not enough people to be able to accomplish the organized goal.

This event will seek to improve relationships within the campus community and with the surrounding community. For this reason, the major philosophy underlying planning for this event will be largely independent decision making. It has already been stressed that community service is a positive, enlightening experience only when an individual wants to do it, not when it is against their will. I am not seeking to foist anything upon any parties involved and instead want them to feel empowered throughout the process of planning. Service organizers will be able to select their own projects and promote their own projects with the Day of Service itself being

present only in the periphery to facilitate broader efforts. The goal of the Day of Service is to facilitate broader, ongoing interest in service organized with an independent, interlinked, grassroots approach. It is several separate, but complementary service events happening simultaneously rather than one big event organized top-down. It lets individuals play an active role in addressing important social and moral issues without being unappealingly burdensome.

Following the planning timeline from the Yale Day of Service, as laid out earlier, work has not yet begun. However, the major first step of initiating interest in such an event has been taken. Lisa Coté in the Office of Orientation and Service Activities received the initial proposal with much enthusiasm and is hopeful about the ability to organize this event. There are several large events on campus which are annually met with anticipation, but there is not such an event relating to community service. A Day of Service would have the unique ability to allow individuals to make a small commitment, become aware of the wide range of opportunities for service in the community and potentially make service a more regular habit.

One of the major planning considerations which must be acknowledged is how to approach it, namely as to whether to make it a deliberately educational event, including lecture or discussion with service events or to simply advertise service as fun, emphasizing the social experience of working with your friends. There is potential for a middle ground which emphasizes both. The reason for the consideration is whether the goal is to maximize participation and have a more impressive event to advertise in the future or to maximize the benefits gained from service by attempting to teach people about its importance, which risks sounding boring to a casual participant. A related consideration is the name of this event; while I have been referring to it as the Day of Service, that name may not come off as fun if that is prioritized. The approach would begin to manifest with advance publicity. As this event seeks to

cultivate awareness of service opportunities, it is essential that it be widely publicized through a variety of channels - email, flyers, tables, word of mouth - so that is impossible to ignore. In having event organizers independently publicize their own event, publicity shows that the Day of Service has a diversity of involved parties instead of one small group arranging an event. Publicity would not end with the beginning of the event; we would heavily encourage use of social media by organizers and participants to expand awareness of the event and St. Mary's commitment to service to a much broader community.

The St. Mary's community extends further beyond the campus than is immediately obvious, and it is important to include the alumni community as well due to the number of potential benefits which could be derived from such a partnership. Relationships with alumni tend to revolve largely around asking for money to support academic missions of this school, which can feel meaningless or inaccurate when alumni only hear from St. Mary's through promotional material. Such an event would provide a concrete basis that this school is attempting to spread its ideal of the St. Mary's Way throughout student lives, even after their time on campus, which would make those ideals more believable. If alumni then believe promotional material which they will inevitably receive, they may be more inclined to donate. But this need not be limited to improving perception of St. Mary's among past students. Alumni organizations could also invite prospective and/or accepted students in the area, who otherwise may be prohibitively far from campus, to participate in such an event. Should they choose to participate, it provides an opportunity for students to interact with past students and ask questions about their St. Mary's experience. This group would have the image of an honest characterization of the St. Mary's experience, as they are not employed by admissions to sell people on the school, but be a

self-selected group that has a positive enough memory of their experience to want to serve in conjunction with the alumni organization.

There are several logistical concerns beyond arranging community partnerships and site selection which are not of immediate concern, considering this event would not take place until April 2016. Fortunately, there is already a small group of work study employees and fellows working with the Office of Orientation and Service Programs who would be able to help work out these concerns. This would allow event organizers to focus their efforts on organizing their specific event while someone else works out the minutiae. Transportation may be an issue, as there is a limited number of college vehicles available, but this need could be greatly reduced by having several on-campus events and heavily encouraging carpooling to off-campus events. Volunteers may need to be fed if events are sufficiently long and during a mealtime, but Bon Appetit would be able to provide food, as they have done so in the past during the service day during new student orientation.

### **Conclusions**

While the Day of Service is still very much in an exploratory stage, it would be reasonable to believe that all major factors in planning such an event have been accounted for and that there is a capable structure in place to make necessary arrangements. Lisa Cote was enthusiastic about the initial project idea, which is a good sign, considering she directs necessary resources for planning such an event and is optimistic that it could feasibly be accomplished. However, such an event will not be until next year and still requires organization of a number of interconnected, but separate factors. This event holds potential to facilitate diverse community involvement and provide an educational experience for students and non-students alike (Parker et al., "Citizenship and Community"). A Day of Service would strengthen the St. Mary's Way and

its perceived legitimacy by providing a bottom-up example of what such a method of thinking can accomplish. Should this event truly be able to work its way up through school's the hierarchy, it could catalyze an institutional paradigm shift of service's role in developing of a true liberal arts student; a liberal arts education ought to extend well beyond the confines of a classroom and provide interpersonal, direct interactions and participation which can elevate an individual's understanding from abstract concepts to experience-based understanding.

### **Recommendations**

This proposal lays out a series of considerations en route to organizing and implementing a grassroots effort to broaden service on this campus, but doing such an event once is not an endgame, nor would it be to do it twice. It is called a bottom-up approach for a reason; it needs to go up from here, changing one of the most steadfast things in society - institutions. The state plan for the Maryland Higher Education Commission does not mention service in any point, entirely neglecting its role in scholarship and lessening its potential in Maryland schools ("2013-2017 Maryland State;" "The Impact of Institutional"). But institutions are not wholly incontrovertible, as they have historically responded to initiatives when supported by enough enthusiastic people. St. Mary's provides an excellent example of that, considering most projects relating to sustainability on campus were initiated by student efforts. As it stands, the Office of Orientation and Student Activities is spread too thin, limiting potential projects and impacts which it could support, such as improvement of its currently minimally informational website. While service has largely minimal costs due to willingness of groups to receive free workers, organization of such efforts requires human resources who require more motivation than a good feeling inside. I would recommend that there be an budget expansion for student employees of this office, as student idealism has brought so many beneficial projects to this campus; having more people

involved makes organization of such ambitious events more of an enriching experience than a taxing one.

A document stating a commitment to service is an important first step forward, but it must be substantiated in the culture of the school. A major way to do that would be to integrate more experiential learning through such activities as service into the curriculum and provide a more enriching, holistic academic experience. One of the major limitations of extracurricular service for a college student is being able to find time to do it and still finish their coursework (“What Predicts Australian”). Coursework which incorporates service activities would allow self-selected, self-motivated students to establish a commitment to service; while such courses would not appeal to or attempt to include students who do not regularly participate in service, they would instead enhance the individual benefits gained from and appreciation of service. These classes provide a wholly different interpretation of coursework and it enriches the individual and the community (Birdwell et al., “Active Citizenship”). Efforts to expand service should not be limited to the student body, and there is currently a proposal in the Staff Senate which has the potential to address that. If passed, this initiative would allot employees a certain number of wellness hours, during which they could undertake an activity of their choosing which improves their personal sense of wellness, while on the clock. In addition to boosting staff health, morale and sense of appreciation, staff members could utilize their wellness hours to participate in community service, providing a separate incentive for staff involvement in the community and assisting in cultivating a campus-wide culture of community service.

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