

St. Cloud Times
To a Higher Degree
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Enriching relationships between colleges/universities and their hometowns through community engagement is a positive trend in higher education and one St. Cloud State has embraced. The physical changes on Fifth Avenue between downtown and campus are matched by the strengthening of partnerships beneficial to the growth, economic development, health and well being of campus and community alike, as well as the growth and well being of our students. Together we're sending a strong message that Fifth Avenue is a two-way street.

A recent St. Cloud Times article cited a study that indicated 50 percent of our graduates don't plan to stay in St. Cloud, and 75 percent said it was because of the local job market. The student-conducted study, done in conjunction with the city's Economic Development Department, also indicated that if students learned more about the city's assets and opportunities, they would be more likely to stay.

We will continue to be actively engaged in fostering economic development in Central Minnesota to help ensure that more of our graduates have the opportunity to live and work in a community that has been an active partner in their education. And we will continue to encourage our students to get involved in the community in ways that will broaden their perspectives about all it has to offer.

St. Cloud State is a community of nearly 20,000 people teaching, learning and serving in the midst of a growing, healthy and vital region. We in fact live in this community. We are committed to teaching our students to recognize the responsibility that goes along with being good neighbors.

Community engagement grows out of a positive spirit of give and take – a realization of the philosophy that the success of one partner is linked to the success of the other.

The broader community is a valuable extension of the classroom, giving our students the opportunity to put academic learning into practice. Through a wide array of internships, volunteer positions, work opportunities and practical work placements, including student teaching and in-hospital practicums, critical learning is taking place beyond the perimeters of campus.

Chances are most of our neighbors frequently interact with St. Cloud State students where they're learning, working, serving, purchasing or volunteering – all forms of community engagement. It's been estimated that 85 percent of our students have jobs, and collectively our students invest 1 million volunteer hours a year.

Studies have shown that students who are engaged in these life-altering activities are more likely to be successful before and after graduation. Examples of mutually beneficial projects that have allowed our students to grow with the community include:

Kaleidoscope Playground for All Abilities at Wilson Regional Park – This spring completion will be celebrated for this decade-long project spearheaded by SCSU students who served as planners, organizers, fundraisers, grant writers and partners that included the city, the Central MN Community Foundation, Bremer Foundation and East Side Boosters. More than 1,000 SCSU students, faculty and

staff had a role in bringing the colorful playground to life as a unique, accessible play space for children of all physical abilities. Along the way students learned valuable lessons that "service-learning" projects offer. They've observed first-hand the diverse needs of community residents and the challenges and rewards of helping to meet those needs. They've also experienced the good feelings that come with making a difference.

Outdoor Endeavors, part of the Office of Sport Facilities & Campus Recreation largely led by students, has been working with the City of St. Cloud, St. Cloud Parks Department and the St. Cloud Rotary Club to establish Lake George as a centerpoint of community outdoor recreation activity. The result of this relationship is Outdoor Endeavors has been operating boat rentals and instructional programs at Lake George for three years and will be bringing a multitude of instructional paddlesports programs (canoe, kayak & stand up paddleboards) to the lake as part of the SCSU Center for Paddlesports Instruction, Education and Safety.

NuVal project – Public health students studying for careers as dietitians or nutritionists got involved in CentraCare Health Foundation's BLEND initiative, which in conjunction with Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota and Coborn's launched the NuVal scoring system aimed at helping Central Minnesotans eat healthier. Student volunteers helped inform customers about how the system helps them compare the overall nutritional value of foods on supermarket shelves.

St. Cloud State's mission is to prepare our graduates for work and life in Minnesota or anywhere in the world. St. Cloud offers unparalleled opportunities to help us achieve that objective.