

Learning



Community STUDENTS

If the names Lauren Duell, Summer Miller, Matthew Wagstaff and Lawrence Jenkins are not familiar to you, one day they will be. These four young adults are among the first 19 graduates of the Canisius College Learning Community Program. The only one-of-its-kind in the area, the goal of the Learning Community Program is to educate and create a new generation of leaders for Buffalo from its populations that historically have been denied positions of influence and power. Clearly, leaders who reflect the diversity of the city, whether they are doctors, lawyers, teachers or business owners, will play a critical role in the future of our city. And who better to educate these leaders than Canisius College.

The program is the brainchild of Kenneth M. Sroka, PhD, and E. Roger Stephenson, PhD, professors of English, whose work with learning communities, also known as team or collaborative learning, taught them that it is an excellent way to develop leadership abilities in students.

Team learning requires students to work in small groups and teach each other the material. A proctor, who is either a professor or an upper-class student, is available to clarify issues and answer questions. But the onus of the team's success is on the students and with that comes development of leadership, communication skills and responsibility, in addition to complete understanding of the course material.

The students in the Learning Community Program are required to take 12 collaborative learning experiences, which include all five general studies (GS) courses (English 101 and 102, philosophy 101 and 102 and religious studies 101) and experiences such as proctoring, internships, study-abroad and community service. The college offers 17 collaborative learning courses in a variety

of subject areas included in the core curriculum, which are open to the general undergraduate population as well.

The results speak for themselves. As of December 2003, the seniors in the program had an average 3.0 GPA. Many assumed leadership positions with campus organizations and participated in volunteer activities as mentors for younger students, which are also strongly emphasized in the program. More than half the students took advantage of the college's study-abroad program.

Among them is **Lauren M. Duell '04**, who wants to shape the lives of young children.

In addition to the rigorous coursework required in her early childhood education major, Duell benefited from hands-on experience as a volunteer at School 17. She was also a tutor with the college's Academic Talent Search Program, which services the needs of low-income, minority and first-generation potential students to encourage their education through middle and high schools, and ultimately to attend college. Student teaching experience helped solidify her future goals.

"After student teaching in the Buffalo public schools, I realized how desperately

inner-city children need positive African American role models, as well as qualified, caring teachers," says Duell. "I feel it is my duty to give back." Duell hopes that, despite economic challenges faced by the Buffalo public school system, the district will offer her a full-time teaching position.

Duell earned a place on the Dean's List every semester while juggling a wide-variety of activities, including the Teacher Education Club (TED), the Griffin Squad Step Team, the Afro-American Society and the program's requirement that students participate in leadership workshops each semester. She believes the Learning Community Program taught her that leadership is more than just serving as the president of a campus-based club or organization.

"Being a leader means having integrity and doing what is right when no one is watching," says Duell. "This program has bombarded us with images of leaders and provided opportunities for each of us to develop and refine our leadership skills."

She is particularly grateful for the opportunity to study abroad in London for a semester, an experience that greatly expanded her horizons.



Lauren Duell '04

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“Without this scholarship I would have never been able to afford to study abroad,” says Duell. “The experience really opened my mind to other cultures. I realized that the world does not revolve around the United States.”

Participation in the study-abroad program is an aspect of leadership development that is highly encouraged by Drs. Stephenson and Sroka.

“One of the ultimate goals of the program is to take young people, our biggest resource, train them in leadership roles and funnel them back into the community,” says Stephenson. “Think of how their perspective changes when they get a world view.”

Studying abroad is just one of the experiences that have left an indelible mark on **Summer M. Miller '04**.

The business administration major hopes to open a local business after graduate school. Miller says she always planned to attend college but would not have been able to afford a school as “prestigious” as *Canisius* without the Learning Community Program.

Now Miller has assumed somewhat of a leadership role in her own family.

“I am the first person in my family to attend college,” says Miller. “I hope I can serve as a role model to my sister and my cousins so that they make education their top priority.”

Four years ago when Miller was featured in the first article about the Learning Community Program in *Canisius Magazine*, (Fall 2000 issue, p. 9) she noted that the challenging nature of the collaborative learning courses required her to develop time-management skills. At first, she worried whether she could handle the workload. However, after hearing Susan Taylor, senior vice president and publication director of *Essence* magazine, speak on campus in 2001 as part of the college’s Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Celebration, Miller was inspired.

“I was so impressed by her success and vision that I really got my act together,” says Miller. “It was as if she were speaking directly to me.”

Miller is moving full steam ahead. She will attend Medaille College for graduate school in management, and just completed an internship at the Buffalo Urban League. Miller has already made such an impression that the agency is eager to place her in a full-time position.

“I feel confident I can be a leader in whatever I do,” says Miller. “There are many situations I can handle, and I communicate well because of the Learning Community Program.”

Because of the peer-oriented learning process characteristic of the learning community, these students learn to master public speaking. According to Sroka, this became evident when he and Stephenson took two learning community students to an international conference in Honolulu.

“The amazing thing is that our students were the only student presenters,” says Sroka. “They addressed a large group of adult educators from all over the country. People really took notice and complimented them.”

One of those student presenters was **Lawrence C. Jenkins '04**, who plans to attend medical school in the fall, preferably at the University at Buffalo. He says becoming a physician is a goal he might not have been able to pursue without the Learning Community Program.

When *Canisius Magazine* spoke with Jenkins four years ago, he praised collaborative learning by saying, “Sometimes you can understand the work better when it is explained by your peers.”

Interestingly enough, the biochemistry major echoed those sentiments again, this time in reference to his work as a proctor in collaborative learning courses. “I really enjoyed the opportunity to be a proctor,” says Jenkins. “I think students are more comfortable asking questions when the proctor is a fellow student.” Jenkins believes the communication skills and confidence he gained in collaborative learning experiences will help him in his future medical career.

“When I think about my future career in medicine, I know that very often there are team situations where I’ll have to work with and get along well with a group of people, which is what you have to do in collaborative learning courses,” says Jenkins. “In this environment, each person needs to recognize what his or her responsibility is and follow-through with it.”



Summer Miller '04

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In addition to academics and extra-curricular activities including the Student Senate, Jenkins dedicated a great deal of time to volunteer work in the community. He tutored middle and high school students, served as a “big brother” for a child through Compeer and lent a hand at the Delavan-Grider Community Center.



Lawrence Jenkins '04

“I appreciated the opportunity to actually give back and help young people get to where they need to be. Perhaps a student that I tutored will go on to college or at least benefit from the experiences I shared with them.”

He welcomes the chance to influence young people and believes that volunteer work is integral to his personal growth.

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Matthew A. Wagstaff '04 is also among the learning community graduates to make family history as the first person, on his mother's side, to receive a four-year degree. He took on many leadership roles on

campus, including treasurer of the Afro-American Society, treasurer of the Student Human Resource Management Society and president of Alpha Kappa Psi. Wagstaff is also a member of Beta Gamma Sigma, the national honor society in business and management. He also served as a proctor. Wagstaff is certain these opportunities, along with his real-world experience as an intern at Adelphia Communications, will benefit him as he begins his professional career.

“I've been in so many leadership roles already,” says Wagstaff. “It has forced me to be a good communicator in order to coordinate events and interact with groups of people. I've also had to serve as a role model for other students.” The management major also earned Dean's List honors every semester.

He adds that living on campus really helped him to focus on his studies.

“Without the learning community scholarship, I probably would have attended a state college and lived at home with my parents,” says Wagstaff. “I became much more independent and developed a close-knit community of friends by living on campus.”

Drs. Sroka and Stephenson have worked closely with all 19 learning community seniors. Over the past four years they served as their advisors and mentors, and monitored their academic and social development. This familiarity makes them especially proud of the students' success.

“We have been very involved with these students during the past four years, which gave us the opportunity to watch them grow,” says Sroka. “When we see them in action, whether it is speaking in front of a group, performing on stage or whatever, we're just amazed.”

For students in the Learning Community Program, success in college wasn't just about academics but also learning team work, effective communication skills and the need to help those less fortunate than themselves. The members of the class of 2004 are eager to use their new-found skills as men and women for others — in real-world leadership roles that will enable them to improve the quality of life in the city of Buffalo.

The real proof will come years from now, as these students choose career paths and make significant contributions in their communities. But Sroka and Stephenson



Matthew Wagstaff '04

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are confident in their abilities and look forward to seeing what develops.

“The long-term goal is to see how these young people become adults and grow in their careers,” says Sroka, “but my money is on these kids.” Stephenson adds, “Jesuit institutions such as Canisius dedicate themselves to educating the whole person and they have a profound social and moral obligation to the communities in which they are located. This program is a tangible manifestation of that commitment.” Funding to initiate the program was provided by the McGowan Charitable Fund and the John R. Oishei Foundation.

If the accomplishments of the Learning Community Class of 2004 are any indication of their future potential, these students will have a visible, positive impact on Western New York for years to come. Duell, Miller, Wagstaff and Jenkins — remember these names. We'll be hearing from them. ■