

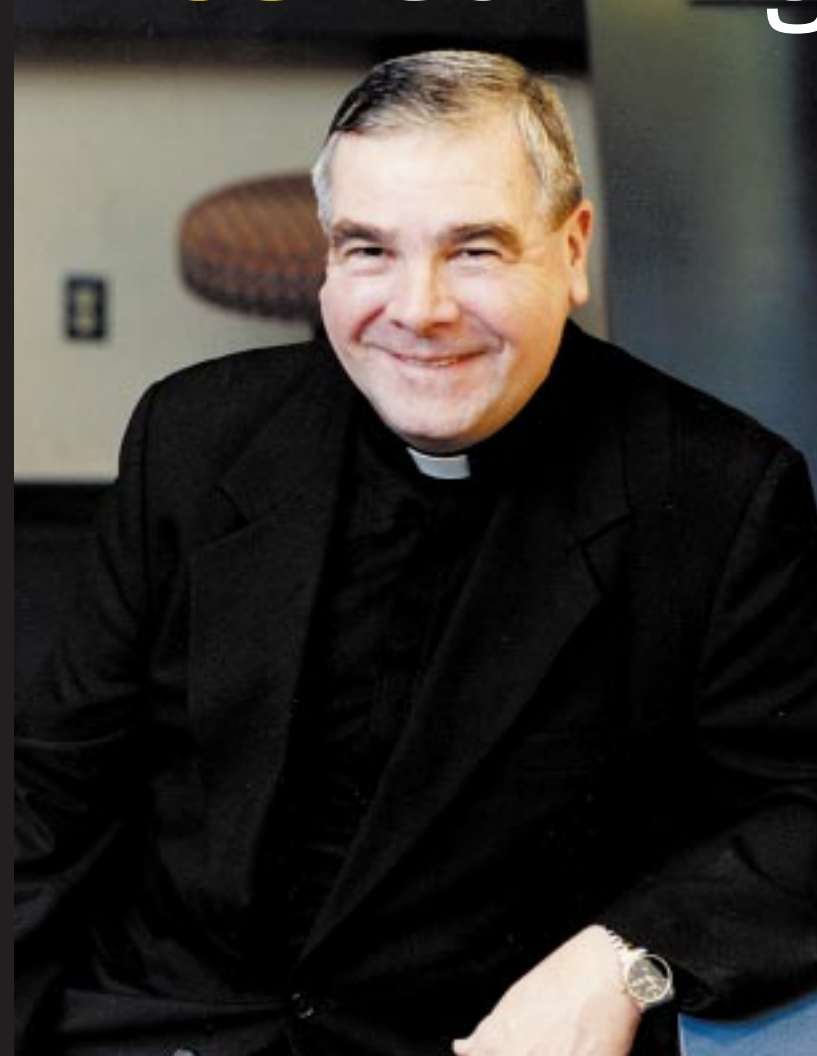
FACULTY • PROFILE  
BY AUDREY R. BROWKA



classroom + community = service-learning



LEFT: DR. JANE E. FISHER  
TOP: DR. PATRICIA B. CHRISTIAN  
RIGHT: REV. J. PETER CONROY, S.J.



One of the goals of a Jesuit education at Canisius is to educate the “whole person.” Behind this mission is the knowledge that challenging students, both academically and socially, prepares them to become leaders in their careers, as well as active members and leaders in their communities. It is a concept rooted in the educational ideals of the Jesuit tradition and is now the basis for a new form of educating at Canisius, known as **service-learning**.

## “By definition,

service-learning combines classroom work and community service, with an emphasis on personal reflection and civic responsibility,” says Rev. J. Peter Conroy, S.J., director of student development. Simply put – students put their academic skills to use through active participation in community service. It is an approach, explains Father Conroy, in which students are able to draw life-long lessons from the experience of being men and women for others.

“To be a person for others, one needs to be solidly trained and well versed in the facts of one’s discipline,” says Father Conroy. “But also to be able to see how that discipline can be used for the benefit of society.”

The practice of service-learning is just beginning to take shape at Canisius and Father Conroy is the guiding force behind its implementation. A \$25,000 grant from The Kurt Berliner Foundation, awarded for the advancement of values education, is

helping Father Conroy initiate the college’s service-learning project. Funds from the grant have enabled him to invite service-learning experts to speak with faculty about the benefits of this teaching method. This gift also provided for the purchase of several reference books for the faculty, now available in the library, which detail sample syllabi of service-learning courses used at other colleges and universities.

**Service**-learning, if it is to be an effective teaching tool, must incorporate three basic components. The first is the classroom component. This requires professors to set the objective for the course, the skills to be learned and the issues to be considered. The first step can be the most difficult for some educators, depending on their specific discipline. But those in the sociology field have embraced service-learning.

“Service-learning is a great hands-on way to show students sociological concepts in practice,” notes Dr. Patricia B. Christian, chair of the Sociology/Anthropology Department.

Dr. Christian began offering service-learning as an option for students in her intro sociology course four semesters ago.

Each week, students study various social problems that range from poverty to racism, gender issues and urban decline. But it is not until students put their classroom theories and social applications into practice that they begin to fulfill the second component of service-learning, which is the actual service work. For students in Dr. Christian’s class, that means they must visit

Buffalo’s Friends of the Elderly Youth and Family Services Center at least eight times a semester to tutor and mentor children.

“I found that students involved in service-learning can literally see the effects various social problems can have on society,” explains Dr. Christian. “For instance, when they are tutoring and working with kids from troubled backgrounds, they begin to develop, what I call, their social imagination. It’s a perspective that allows them to see how the structure of society has influenced our lives; how belonging to a particular social group or living in a particular place actually can impact our lives; how the funding or the organizational society has an actual impact on real children that these students can now attach names to.”

While experiences such as these begin to develop a student academically and intellectually, Father Conroy notes that their educational journey is not complete until they fulfill the final and most significant component of service-learning, which is reflection.

“Through reflection, students begin to really think and analyze their experience and draw lessons from it,” states Father Conroy. “Thinking about the service creates a greater understanding of the experience and the way it addresses the needs of the community. At the same



Tammy L. Koeppel '04 works with children at Buffalo's Friends of the Elderly Youth and Family Services Center.

time, the analysis and thought allow students to absorb what they have learned.”

Reflection can be approached in several different ways but is often performed through class discussion or service journals – a written record kept by students that chronicles their experiences in the community.

Dr. Jane E. Fisher, associate professor of English, found the latter option to be most beneficial for students in her English 361 class, Literature of Service, Special Topic: Disabilities. Introduced in spring 2000, the course combines readings and films, about and often written

### COMPONENT #2 service

Students put their classroom theories and social applications to practice.

and produced by disabled people, with community service projects

that focus on the needs of disabled people.

“This course grew out of two separate interests in disability studies and service-learning that I realized could be combined into one course,” says Dr. Fisher. “Reading narratives and viewing films about disabled people would give students insight into the experience of being disabled. Working with disabled people in the community would allow my students to become active citizens and better understand the dimensions of disability.”

R.A. Rhoads, a service-learning researcher and author of *Community Service and Higher Learning: Explorations of the Caring Self*, writes that students who engage in community service work through service-learning classes are more likely to personalize social concerns. As a result,

they are more willing to become involved in work for social change. But Rhodes believes it is unlikely they will reach that point if they do not first reflect on their experiences.

**Students** in Dr. Fisher’s class are required to complete a reflective journal entry each week that was based on their service experience and the reading material assigned in class. “You only begin to grow intellectually, psychologically and spiritually through reflection,” says Dr. Fisher. “It’s great to go to a soup kitchen or visit a homeless shelter and work but what is really so valuable is if students can reflect on their experience and ask themselves what they learned from it. Even more important is that they integrate it — that is connect it to their lives.”

The academic and real-life lessons of service-learning will stay with students long after their formal education is complete. Aside from enhanced moral and social development, service-learning students typically demonstrate a growth in self-esteem, a heightened sense of civic duty and greater leadership abilities. But students are not the only ones who gain from this concentrated teaching method. Father Conroy suggests that service-learning can be motivating for the faculty who employ it.

“The emphasis on service-learning is the learning, for both students and faculty. In the real world, one is given gifts. Whether they be intellectual gifts or unique skills, they are gifts that are given to us to be able to be used for others and that is what service-learning is all about.” ■

### COMPONENT #3

reflection Students analyze their service experiences in journals to obtain a greater understanding and concern about community issues.

“I will probably see things that are not easy to deal with, but if I open myself up to them for the lessons they provide, I have no doubt that I will grow from this experience. If I am really lucky, I will be able to help others on this journey as well.”

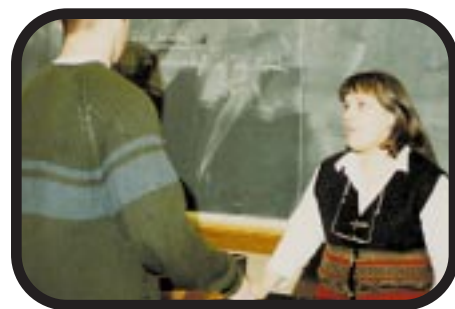
— Erin Oveis '01

“I learned more about students with both physical and learning disabilities than I could have ever imagined. There is no reason to be afraid because you just talk to them like a normal friend and they will respond to you just like a normal friend would.”

— Kristen Maerten '01

“Being able to get along by yourself is one thing but being able to get along with others is quite another! Certain attitudes and personalities shine through when people are forced to get along and work together. They may have their disagreements and different opinions but they soon learn to deal with their differences and work cooperatively to accomplish what needs to be done.”

— Kimberly Williams '02



### COMPONENT #1 classroom

Educators set objectives for the skills to be learned, the issues to be considered and the projects to be completed in class.