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Students Continue Outreach Virtually During the Pandemic

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Volunteer programs & service learning staff adapts, gets inventive with students' volunteer options

Sacred Heart University students have been able to carry on their engagement in community service during the pandemic, thanks to the efforts of staff in the office of [volunteer programs & service learning](#) (VPSL).

Following all recommended guidelines and protocols to guard against the coronavirus, the VPSL staff has been creative with its programming. To start, its annual, week-long, pre-fall program, [Community Connections](#), took place with 16 student leaders hosting 37 freshmen virtually.

Community Connections introduces incoming freshmen to service opportunities in the Bridgeport area and increases their understanding of urban issues. Typically, students are housed at two of the city's churches while they work on various projects throughout the week, from painting structures to gardening and general maintenance. With the need to connect online only, Community Connections still introduced participants to the Bridgeport community and its many nonprofits through daily panel video discussions. Students also had the opportunity to perform service remotely. In the evenings, they attended virtual reflection sessions.

"The program was an overall success," said Annie Wendel, assistant director of VPSL. "Even though we were remote, participants told us they felt connected to their peers, student leaders, VPSL staff and community."

"Community Connections was a program that I knew I would enjoy, but it became so much more than I could have ever imagine or asked for," said senior Georgia Lapierre. She is enrolled in the College of Health Professions and is studying exercise science and physical therapy. "Many of the organizations in Bridgeport that I am still involved with are because of Community Connections. I never thought that my passion for community

service could have grown so much in just one week. This set the bar for how I wanted to give back to my community during my time here at SHU and for the rest of my life. I learned to be more understanding and kind, I learned on a deeper level about the food, home, educational and opportunity injustices in our community.”

Working with the Bridgeport school system and after-school programs, VPSL fulfilled the requirements for “America Reads, America Counts,” a federally funded work-study grant. More than 34 SHU students in that project tutored schoolchildren in reading and math.

The VPSL also sponsored its annual holiday “Adopt-a-Family” fundraiser, for which departments throughout the University raised money. SHU Athletics contributed greatly to this initiative. Staff from VPSL then purchased gift cards for families who are in tight financial situations.



Additionally, the University’s 10th annual turkey drive took place, ensuring that struggling families would have a traditional Thanksgiving dinner. Student government members purchased turkeys, while VPSL and campus ministry representatives conducted a food drive. Members of many other student clubs and sports teams also helped with the cause. The turkeys and food items were donated to St. Charles Borromeo Church in Bridgeport and distributed to city residents.

Spring semester

Students who are interested in service opportunities in January have options, as well.

CURTIS Week (Community Understanding and Reflection Through Inner-city Service), an annual week of engagement that exposes students to urban issues of poverty, racism and immigration first-hand, will take place virtually from Jan. 11 to 14. Participants will engage remotely on work projects and live, interactive sessions with Bridgeport community partners. Students will hear from campus ministry interfaith chaplains about the connection between faith and service, and they also will participate in hands-on evening reflection activities with peers.

This year's CURTIS Week will be a bit more personal than usual. Wendel said students will work in small groups and check in daily over video. Assignments will vary from making fleece blankets for nonprofit organizations to other service activities and reflection.

"We're getting resourceful," Wendel said. "The need for assistance is greater now than ever, and we are going to do everything we can to give back."

With no global or local spring-break trips, students also can take part in VPSL's virtual spring break or global service-learning programs from Jan. 25-29. Through video communications, students will work with one of SHU's global partners. These global service-learning programs will offer students the opportunity to connect virtually with communities in Costa Rica or Italy.

Participants will speak with community leaders; participate in virtual community tours and cultural activities, such as lessons on making tortillas; Latin dance class; pottery lessons and other options. Participants also will complete a virtual service project benefitting local community organizations.

"Students are interested in global learning," Wendel said. She acknowledged that the available options this year are not the same as going to Italy or Costa Rica to help families in person. However, students will still be interacting and engaging with people from abroad, while providing a service such as English lessons, arts and crafts for children or yoga sessions.

Students interested in CURTIS Week or global service-learning programs should contact VPSL at volunteer_programs@sacredheart.edu.

Lead photo: Students on campus during Community Connections week. Inset: Students distribute Thanksgiving turkeys at St. Charles Borromeo Church in Bridgeport. (photo not shown)

