



Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement

Annual Report 2023/2024





President Emeritus, the Reverend Joseph L. Levesque, CM.

Father Levesque's dedication to education, community service, and spiritual guidance has left an enduring mark on Niagara University and the broader community. Through his visionary leadership, Father Levesque championed numerous initiatives that have strengthened our community bonds and fostered the spirit of collaboration and progress.

The Levesque Institute will honor his memory by continuing to advance the programs and initiatives he so passionately believed in. We are dedicated to upholding his legacy through our ongoing efforts in civic engagement, equitable education, community revitalization and meaningful impact.

Let's continue to uphold the principles he so fervently championed. Our thoughts and prayers are with his family, friends, and all who were fortunate to know him. May his legacy of faith, service, and dedication continue to inspire us all.





From the Executive Director:



As we embark on the 2024-2025 year, I am excited to share our vision and goals for the Levesque Institute. In alignment with Niagara University's 2018-2025 Strategic Plan, we are focused on a renewed commitment to our mission of achieving academic excellence, developing a skilled workforce, and addressing critical needs throughout the Western New York region. This work continues to be fueled by unwavering support from community and faith-based partners, local government, businesses, faculty, staff, students, and alumni. A key area of our work remains in the revitalization of Niagara Falls, NY, where we aim to foster sustainable development and community empowerment. Under the leadership of President Rev. James J. Maher, CM, we are driven by a shared vision of progress and transformation.

This year, we will deepen our efforts in civic engagement, weaving diversity, equity, and inclusion into the social fabric of all our initiatives. By leveraging the strengths and resources of our changed community, we aim to implement systemic solutions that promote health and wellness, support P-12 education, and drive targeted resurgence. Our goal is to not only address immediate needs, but to build resilient communities capable of sustaining long-term positive change for the residents within them.

By harnessing our collective power, we can make a lasting impact. Our shared dedication to this mission empowers us to create a more equitable future for all. As we look ahead, I am filled with optimism and gratitude. Together, we can achieve remarkable progress and ensure that our region thrives. Thank you for your ongoing support and commitment.

Warm regards,

Rhonda Bivins-Talley

Executive Director
Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement





Lois Lyons Brennan Scholars

“All beginnings are somewhat strange; but we must have patience, and little by little, we shall find things, which at first were obscure, becoming clearer.”

— St. Vincent de Paul

Lois Lyons Brennan Scholarship welcomes Class of 2028 Cohort
The Brennan Scholarship, complemented by structured program activities, significantly enhances student preparedness for high achieving first generation high school students. By providing essential financial support and resources, the scholarship empowers them to excel academically and develop leadership skills. The wrap-around support and service-learning projects offer enrichment tailored to their professional goals, ensuring they are well equipped for the transition to college life and long-term success.

There are currently 23 Brennan Scholarship recipients on the Niagara University Lewiston Campus. A new cohort of 8 students is selected each year.

Welcome Class of 2028 Lois Lyons Brennan Scholars

Ariela Granados, International Preparatory School at Grover, Buffalo, NY

Taylor Johnson, St Mary’s High School, Depew, NY

Salina Mobae, Leonardo Da Vinci High School, Buffalo, NY

Brianna Pap, Hamburg High School, Hamburg, NY

Liliann Drzazgowski, West Seneca-West Senior High School, Buffalo, NY

Alexandra Bidzerkowny, Wellsville High School, Wellsville, NY

Siena Marzan, Stockbridge Valley Central School, Munnsville, NY

Adriana Rotella, Niagara Falls High School, Niagara Falls, NY

The Scholars in Action

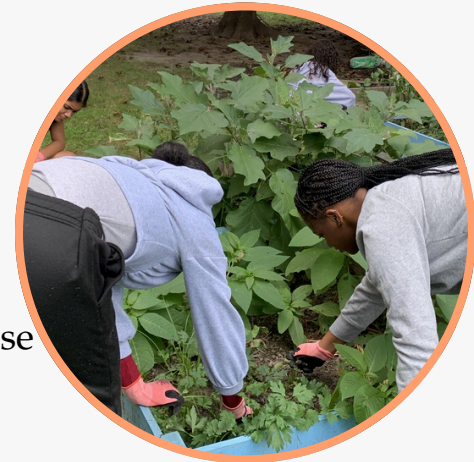


Office of IMPACT

Innovative Mission Projects Accelerating Community Transformation


Through the Office of Innovative Missions Projects Accelerating Community Transformation (IMPACT), Niagara University promotes a model of mission-driven change through project-based learning, leadership, and civic engagement to address critical needs in the greater Western New York region, with an emphasis on the city of Niagara Falls, New York. The office works closely with faculty, advisors, students, campus club groups, residents, school districts, community-based organizations, and businesses to build on existing direct, indirect, research, and advocacy-based contributions of service. The IMPACT office is responsible for the collection of service activity occurring both on and off campus and reporting the economic impact value of service provided for the 113 Niagara University registered clubs and organizations. Economic impact value of service is calculated based on the number of collective volunteer hours students contribute in local communities based on federal guidelines per service hour.

- Service Learning
- 702 Experiential learning experiences
- Volunteer Opportunities
- Project Based Learning
- GUI Community Map- CIS 480 Project Management Course
- 618 new users registered in IMPACT Connects system
- NUMO Community Service Day



**Impact
Connects
database of
1,008
community
partners.**

**Economic
impact Value
\$2,996,025. 00**



Through the Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement, Niagara University is committed to the revitalization of the city of Niagara Falls and the Western New York region. We have established four pillars in addition to the IMPACT office to meet the critical needs of our community. Within each pillar, programs and projects are designed with measurable outcomes that seek to bring systemic change.

Early Childhood

Providing expertise in programming and professional development that consistently produces positive outcomes, elevating the quality of care and early education in both school readiness, social-emotional development, and transition to kindergarten.

Community Outreach


Aligning the resources of the University to the community needs assisting residents, school districts, and community organizations in the areas of: career and college readiness, civic engagement, family literacy, and workforce preparation.

Health & Wellness

Residents of the City of Niagara Falls are exposed to conditions that negatively impact their social determinants of health. Programming and advocacy are designed to address barriers that shape the conditions in the environment where people are born, live, learn, work, play, worship, and age that affect a wide range of health, functioning, and quality of life outcomes.

Revitalization

Levesque Institute, in partnership with the City of Niagara Falls, Niagara County and community organizations, is committed to the rehabilitation of neighborhoods. In addition, in a city with an unemployment rate higher than the state and national average, workforce development and job preparation focusing on in-demand occupations is a priority for the Institute.



Early Childhood

Providing expertise in programs and professional development

Programs are established to support early childhood professionals, head start infants and toddlers, 3 and 4-year-old toddlers, and the families of early childhood program registrants.

Programs and services include:

- Successful Early Education Developmental Series (SEEDS)
- Positive Solutions for Families
- Parents Interacting with Infants (PIWI)
- Trauma Informed Care Training for Parents
- “Finding the Why” Behavior Parent Workshop
- Niagara Falls School District Kindergarten Jamboree



1,574
Children Impacted
by LI Early
Childhood
Programs



Child Development Associate (CDA) Course

A Child Development Associate (CDA) Courses are a Continued Success “I was honored to be offered the CDA professor job for the Spring 2024 semester. The students were happy and engaged and I enjoyed teaching and providing them with resources about Early Childhood Education a well as resources in the community that directly impact their roles as ECE professionals. I am excited to continue this role as CDA professor and to meet and assist ECE professionals in our community. I have been in this field for 20 years and I am passionate about helping to shape the minds of those who shape the minds of our littlest learners.” -Lindsay Kilijanski, CDA Course Instructor



What's Next

- On Campus Practice Based Coaching
- Virtual TIPTOS Training
- Virtual Pyramid Trainings
- Niagara Falls School District Kindergarten Jamboree
- Successful Early Education Developmental Series (SEEDS)

Community Outreach and External Partnerships

Aligning the resources of the university to address community needs

Within this pillar lies diverse opportunities working within the community. The Levesque Institute partners with residents and community organizations to provide programming in the areas of career and college readiness, civic engagement, and family literacy.

- Early College/Smart Scholars
- eSports (CIS courses)
- Linking Literacy to Movement
- Community Service Resource Day
- Junior Achievement in a Day
- Project Based-Learning Experiences
- High School ESL Authorshare Program
- Preparatory Level Critical Literacy Classes
- Inclusive NU
- Civic Engagement Community Survey
- Parent and Student Speaker Event
- Community and Church based Speaker Event

6,456 Internship Hours in Community Based Organizations

312 Middle and High School Students Participated in Programs



What's Next

- WNY Service Learning Coalition Summit
- Habitat for Humanity Home Build Vincentian Heritage Week
- Community Resource Day
- Disability Services Family Supports Fair

New Initiative Highlight

Inclusive NU

The inaugural Inclusive NU summer experience was a one-week college and career readiness camp designed for 25 Niagara Falls High School students with disabilities. This innovative program aimed to bridge the gap in education and support, helping students transition into post-secondary education or the workforce. "Our goal is to provide tailored guidance, resources, and essential skills to succeed," said Rhonda Bivins-Talley of the Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement. The camp fostered independence, self-confidence, and essential skills for future success.

Funded by the United Way of Greater Niagara's Beeman Foundation, the camp aligned with the Beeman Foundation's mission to promote equity and inclusivity, ensuring students with disabilities have equal access to opportunities. The program featured structured lessons and activities covering topics such as college and workplace etiquette, self-advocacy, and goal-setting. Students participated in a summer American Sign Language course and developed individualized portfolios showcasing their achievements.

Students also visited the Castellani Museum and participated in safety awareness training facilitated by Dave Whalen and retired police officer Captain Mann. Parents were involved in advocacy workshops, and students had a hands-on science lab experience with Dr. Gallo, exploring insect ecosystems.

The Inclusive NU camp aligns with Niagara University's strategic plan for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), promoting a culture of inclusion and strengthening community ties through partnerships with local organizations and businesses. The Levesque Institute's role in the program is crucial, as it continues to support participants throughout the school year with portfolio development and campus visits. The program aims to improve long-term outcomes for students with disabilities, including higher rates of college enrollment, employment, and supportive living.

"They were provided opportunities to succeed alongside their peers in a college setting. This program was a great opportunity to prepare all of our students for life in a diverse society". -
Niagara Falls High School Special Education teacher Nicole Grant

"We're committed to supporting these students beyond camp"
-Levesque Institute's Operations
Manager Cary Newman'



Revitalization in the City of Niagara Falls

Our why? Community engagement and external initiatives are at the core of our strategic plan and Vincentian Catholic mission.

Niagara University is deeply committed to revitalization initiatives that promote economic development and social impact within the Niagara Falls community. Central to this mission is the Academic Innovation Hub (AIH), supported by significant federal, state, and private funding, which will serve as a cornerstone of the Downtown Revitalization Initiative. By partnering with key stakeholders, including city officials and community leaders, Niagara University is fostering a collaborative environment that bridges academia and the community. This collaboration is further enriched by the integration of social and academic programs, research, and workforce preparation, all of which are designed to support and sustain community growth.

“Niagara University’s Strategic and External Relation efforts truly brings our *mission to action*. We are proud of NU’s contribution to the economic development efforts in the region.”



Dr. Karen Kwandrans, Associate Vice President
Strategic and External Relations

Research and Innovation

Through community-based interdisciplinary research and evidence-based practices, Niagara University initiates studies to identify opportunities, contribute to and inform future courses and programming, and strengthen collaborations between the community and faculty or staff.



1. LISC Neighborhood Housing Assessment

Niagara University partnered with the City of Niagara Falls Planning & Environmental Department, Niagara Orleans Regional Land Improvement Corp., (NORLIC), Niagara Area Habitat for Humanity, and Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC) to spearhead comprehensive data collection to provide information to evaluate housing market conditions in the midtown area of the City of Niagara Falls. This group is dedicated to creating a vibrant, equitable, and inclusive community through research, community engagement, identification of grants and funding, and the development of future housing and neighborhood initiatives.

- 3,325 parcels North/Central NF/609 sidewalk segments
- 76 GIS datasets
- ESRI license and research for NU students supervised by Dr. Yonghong Tong (CIS)
- NU hosted webpage with ArcGIS web mapping tool -public data
- Published report and press event September 13, 2024



2. Oishei Workforce Development Study

Led by Dr. Krieg Tidemann, this study will assess the impact of existing non-traditional educational opportunities within the Niagara Falls community, by looking at the impacts of these workforce development initiatives on a wide range of outcomes. While non-exhaustive, this could include labor force participation, employment status, and self-identified financial well-being. NU students have the opportunity to participate in paid research under the guidance of Dr. Tidemann.

Community Engagement

Understanding the importance of community involvement, we actively engage with residents, community-based organizations, local government agencies, and businesses to gather insights, identify needs, and facilitate meaningful dialogue to co-create sustainable solutions for housing, education, neighborhood, and economic development.

1. M&T Women and Minority Small Business Networking 60+ attendees- December 14, 2023



This event featured a panel of small business owners representing hospitality, transportation, and construction as well as representatives from the following organizations: Niagara USA Chamber of Commerce, City of Niagara Falls Economic Development Office, Niagara Small Business Development Center, Ibero Business Center, Destination Niagara USA, Compliance and Administrative Services of WNY, and Pursuit. The Networking event was designed to empower MWBE business owners at all stages of business through the provision of resources and opportunities to share, connect and learn from the experiences of like-minded entrepreneurial individuals.

2. M&T Multicultural Small Business Lab- May-June 2024

Understanding that small businesses are the backbone of our local economy and provide tremendous value, Niagara partnered with M&T Bank to hold their first Multicultural Small Business Lab in Niagara County.



- 6-week course for multicultural small business owners
- Presenters- MTB employees & NU professors, community partner organizations
- 25 participants
- Pitch Contest/Business Prize: 1st place - \$5,000, 2nd place - \$3,000, 3rd place - \$2,000

The purpose of training was to empower, develop, and grow racially and ethnically diverse small businesses, the program provides local entrepreneurs with guidance, education, and resources to start and build businesses that strengthen neighborhoods and meet community needs.

Foundation Grant- \$250,000 for Academic Innovation Hub- committing \$250,000 in support of technology and capital improvements to the Academic Innovation Hub.

Workforce Development

Recognizing the impact of workforce development, NU developed career pathways and offers paid internships in the community to increase the knowledge and employment skills of students by offering real-life work experiences.

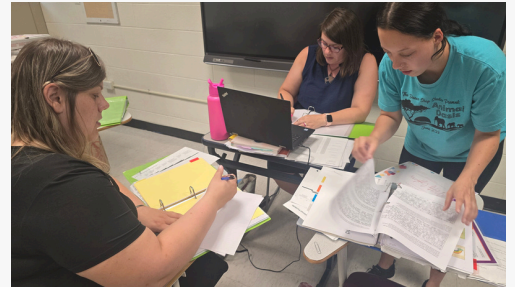
1. NU Student Paid Internships Oishei

This internship program leverages the institution's resources, both in academic and student capital, to enhance the operational reach of community-based organizations in the City of Niagara Falls. The paid internship experience allows 40 Niagara University students to gain hands-on experiences in various community and organizational initiatives as they further define their career pathways.

2. Professional Micro-credentials-

Short, focused credentials designed to provide in-demand skills, knowledge, and experience (Child Development Associate, Assistant Behavioral Analyst, Teaching Assistant)

- Training for underemployed or unemployed individuals
- Upskilling for professional in need of advanced coursework



3. Industry Partnerships

NU actively fosters strategic partnerships with national companies, enhancing collaborative projects and facilitating knowledge transfer. These connections not only enrich the academic experience for students but may also contribute to the development of innovative solutions that address real-world challenges for businesses.

- Odoo
- Amazon



John R. Oishei Foundation Internship Highlights

Olivia Harrington

Class of 2025

Major: Social Work

Internship Placement: Niagara Falls Memorial Medical Center



“This internship has opened my interest in things I never thought I would see myself doing. The most rewarding part was meeting individuals who have impacted my life in various ways. Not only did this opportunity prepare me for senior year, but guided me into finding a career path that I am so grateful to start.”

Olivia was offered a position as a Recreation Therapist in Niagara Falls Memorial’s Inpatient Behavioral Health Units. She will be developing and facilitating group activities for patients.

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Angelica Wijesiriwardena

Class of 2025

Major: Education Birth -Sixth Grade

Internship Placement: Niagara University Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement.



“ I got the incredible opportunity to collaborate with Rhonda Bivins-Talley on the JA (Junior Achievement) in a day at Abate Elementary School. I also met Ayanna, a current high school student who is inspired to become a teacher. I was able to share my experiences on this path with her and answer any concerns she had about being a teacher. This volunteer opportunity allowed me to use my degree to expand on the JA curriculum and make it enjoyable and interactive. I discovered that many of the students were already quite knowledgeable on the material we presented them with. We had the honor of working with sixth-grade students in the enrichment program. They were able to learn a great deal from us, nevertheless. This was an incredible occasion. I’m really glad I was able to precipitate and get valuable knowledge and experience that will benefit me as a future teacher. “

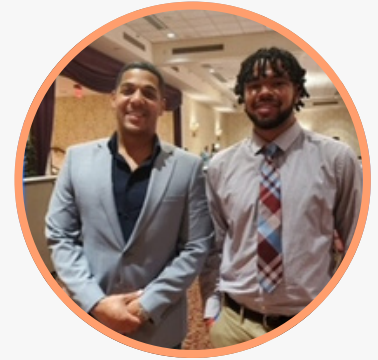
John R. Oishei Foundation Internship Highlights

Daesean Ashley

Class of 2026

Major: Business Management

Internship Placement: DMyles Construction



“This opportunity to intern at DMyles Inc prepared me for after I graduate in many ways. Most importantly it has provided me with a boost to my work ethic and professionalism. The staff here has given me the ability of autonomy and allowed me to do many tasks that have been essential to the company's growth. This differed from previous jobs/opportunities because it gave me a feeling of accomplishment and importance. This opportunity also helped me fine tune my organization and time management skills. Another great thing it provided was real-life experience. It has been very interesting to see the broad range of topics covered in many of my classes at Niagara University in a real setting. I often found myself saying, "I remember covering this in class." I would say the most rewarding part of this opportunity is the connections and relationships I have made. The staff here immediately made me feel accepted and a part of the work family, and are quick to help if there is anything I need. This opportunity has been very good for me in many aspects especially socially, and I have gained much more confidence in myself.”

Daesean was offered a part-time position at Dmyles Construction as a Junior Project Manager that he has already began.

