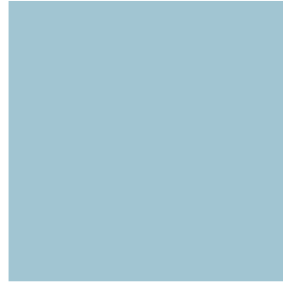
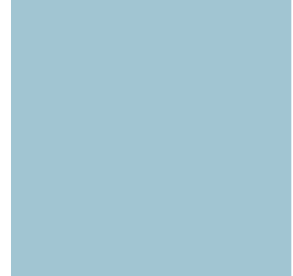


Through our faith and service, we can change the face of the earth.

Rev. Joseph L. Levesque, C.M.



Annual Report 2024/2025



**NIAGARA
UNIVERSITY**

LEVESQUE INSTITUTE FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

As we reflect on another year of impact, purpose, and progress, I am filled with gratitude and hope.

Our mission remains deeply rooted in Niagara University's Vincentian values — values that call us to stand alongside our communities, collectively problem-solve through conversation, and inspire transformation through action.

Guided by Father Maher's renewed priorities for Niagara University — student-centered learning, advancing community impact, and expanding the university's role as a regional anchor, the Levesque Institute proudly stands at the intersection of vision and responsibility. This year, we deepened our commitment to building pipelines of opportunity, supported innovative service-learning experiences, and empowered students to be active leaders of change where they live, learn, and find purpose.

The 2024–2025 academic year challenged us to think boldly and serve faithfully. It also reminded us that transformative impact begins with small, consistent acts of courage — the kind our students, faculty, and community partners model every day. As we look ahead, we carry the belief that our greatest accomplishments are measured not only in numbers, but in the lives we touch and the hope we seek to restore.

Thank you for walking this journey with us. Together, we are not only doing what is right — we are shaping what is possible.

With gratitude and purpose,
Rhonda C. Bivins-Talley
Executive Director
Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement



FROM THE ENGAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS MANAGER

I am grateful to have been selected to join the Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement in March of 2025. As a small business owner with an operations background spanning multiple sectors including Developmental Disabilities Services, Healthcare, and Early Childhood Literacy; I look forward to supporting the many facets of Levesque as well as its growth and sustainability for the future.

Kind regards,
Lisa J. McCue
Engagement and Operations Manager
Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement



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 drive sustainable progress.



Education (Birth - 12th Grade)

Providing expertise in programming and professional development that consistently produces positive outcomes, elevating the quality of care and education in Birth through 12th grade transitions.

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 and Wellness

Programming and advocacy are designed to address social determinants of health 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. Issues like housing, workforce development, and job preparation focusing on in-demand occupations is a priority for the Institute.

Education

(Birth - 12th Grade)

The Levesque Institute partners with school districts, childcare centers and community organizations to provide programming in the areas of career and college readiness, civic engagement, and family literacy.



Early Childhood Education (Birth - age 8)

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
- Niagara Falls School District Kindergarten Jamboree
- Practice Based Coaching- Facilitated

Pipeline Programs

Pipeline programs are structured, sequential initiatives that guide students from one educational stage to the next, providing continuous support, skill development, and opportunities along the way.

The Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement leads a continuum of these programs that prepare students for lifelong learning and success with the opportunity to earn college credits that strengthen college preparedness. Together, these Institute-led initiatives create clear pathways from early learning through post-secondary education.

Elementary

- Linking Literacy to Movement

Prep-School

- Prep Level Literacy Book Club

High School

- Dual Enrollment Opportunities
- Bridges to Excellence Program
- Early College/Smart Scholars
- ESports (Computer Information Science /Intro to Marketing courses)
- Project Based-Learning Experiences (Lead to NYS Civic Seal of Readiness)
- ESL Authorship Project

Child Development Associate Credential (CDA)

Child Development Associate (CDA) certification strengthens the early childhood workforce and opens pathways to higher education.

The Child Development Associate Credential (CDA)

The CDA three (3) course program, launched to address the need for skilled professionals in early childhood, equips early childhood professionals with essential skills and knowledge to directly support the development of young children. Participants who complete the Early Childhood Education series, earn nine (9) college credits. This micro-credential provides a strong entry point to higher education, leading to an industry-recognized certificate, and increased potential for academic and career advancement.



New Education Initiative:

Bridges to Excellence Program

Building Bridges to Excellence is a two-year program generously funded by the Peter and Elizabeth Tower Foundation. The Levesque Institute was awarded \$175,000 in November 2024, to address the unique needs of Niagara Falls High School junior and senior students in special education programs. Our goal is to provide 50 students and their families with the tailored support, career readiness experiences, and resources required for a seamless transition from high school into post-secondary education or meaningful employment, and independence.

The program combines school-year workshops with a robust summer camp experience hosted at Niagara University. Students participate in hands-on college readiness sessions, workforce development training, and self-advocacy skill-building, while also engaging in social and community activities that foster confidence. The two-week summer camp served as a cornerstone of the program, offering students valuable exposure to campus life, structured learning in a supportive environment and individualized career planning tailored to their interests.

The Bridges program also provided an opportunity for Niagara University students to gain real-world experience in disability advocacy and transition services – blending student learning with community impact.

The Bridges to Excellence program exemplifies Niagara University's Vincentian mission by addressing gaps in postsecondary preparation for students with learning differences. Through dedicated partnerships, funding from the Tower Foundation, and the energy of NU students and faculty, the program continues to equip youth with the skills, assurances, and opportunities for success in post secondary and programs and the workforce.



“Watching my grandson thrive in the Bridges to Excellence program at Niagara University’s Levesque Institute has filled me with overwhelming gratitude and hope. This incredible initiative gives high school students and their parents a hands-on experience exploring educational, vocational, and community opportunities. With dynamic presenters and meaningful skill assessments, the program doesn’t just prepare students—it inspires them.

I want to extend my deepest thanks to the extraordinary team at the Levesque Institute—Rhonda, Dreanna, and Lisa—for their compassion, dedication, and impact. Because of them, my grandson is on a promising path toward employment and a meaningful life.

This program doesn’t just build bridges—it builds futures!”

Debbie Walk



Student Internship Highlight



Dreanna Parasram

Class of 2026

Major: Social Work

Internship Placement: Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement

Dreanna Parasram is an international student from Canada currently in her senior year in Niagara University's undergraduate Social Work program. In Summer 2025, through the Career Discovery Internship Fund, she was hired as a Support Staff Worker for the Bridges to Excellence Program, where she played a vital role in mentoring high school students with learning differences.

Recognizing her leadership and dedication, the Levesque Institute later hired Dreanna as the part-time Transition Program Coordinator for the Bridges to Excellence program. In this role, she continues to support students and families as they prepare for postsecondary opportunities, while also gaining professional experience that aligns directly with her career path in social work.

“During my time with the Bridges to Excellence program, I supported high school students through campus visits, career workshops, and enrichment activities that helped them explore their futures. I created student portfolios, facilitated group reflections, and assisted with case management intakes to connect students with resources and opportunities. The most rewarding part was seeing students gain confidence as they discovered new goals and possibilities. This experience not only strengthened my passion for social work but also gave me the professional foundation and hands-on practice I need to step confidently into my final year at NU.”

Dreanna Parasram

Community Outreach and External Partnerships

By working hand-in-hand with community partners—including city officials, school districts, healthcare providers, and neighborhood organizations—the Levesque Institute translates Niagara University’s mission into meaningful action. Together, we deliver programs that prepare high school students for college, expand access to workforce training, and address health and wellness needs for families and seniors. These partnerships have resulted in cleaner neighborhoods, an increased number of experiential learning projects, new opportunities for youth employment, and stronger pathways to higher education.

Highlights from 2024–2025 include:

Vincentian Heritage Week — The Levesque Institute coordinated service projects and supported interviews for the 400 Years Vincentian video, which featured NU student volunteers serving meals and assisting guests at Heart, Love & Soul. The Institute donated turkeys to supplement a holiday shortage for 20 families and gathered NU student volunteers from the Men’s Hockey team and Brennan Scholars—for the Turkey Dinner Giveaway at Kalfas Elementary School, where 600 Niagara Falls families received a turkey with can goods and other fixings to make a full Thanksgiving dinner. The turkey giveaway is sponsored annually by Bridge Niagara Foundation and Aero Transportation, owned by Niagara University alumni Nasreen Akhtar, ’16.

Community Services Resource Fair — Each semester, NU students are connected with local nonprofits, businesses, and healthcare providers to learn more about resources offered, service-learning, and employment opportunities. The event is held on campus in the Gallagher Center.

Junior Achievement Career Pathways — Training is offered yearly to NU students to become certified JA Program Facilitators. Certification permits volunteers to deliver JA curriculum for Levesque Institute partners locally, and to facilitate programs nationwide, expanding their service opportunities while increasing the number of student volunteers available to deliver financial literacy, work and career readiness and entrepreneurship lessons for students in grades K-12.

Parachute Financial Services Literacy Workshops — In collaboration with Parachute Credit Counseling and the BankOnBuffalo-Niagara Coalition, students and families participated in financial literacy sessions during Spring 2025 campus visits and the first day of summer camp. These workshops introduced safe banking services, budgeting, and money management skills.

Niagara Area Habitat for Humanity Rock the Block — Members of NU's Women's Basketball team, Catholic Heart Work Camp youth, city residents, and corporate volunteers joined together in the South End of Niagara Falls near 25th Street to improve housing exteriors and beautify neighborhoods.

Niagara Beautification Commission Green Acres Garden — Located on 4th Street and Ferry Avenue in Niagara Falls' South End, this initiative engaged students in sustainability and food security efforts. Levesque Institute work study Leeann Gajewski partnered with Niagara Beautification to help NU students break ground on a new community garden and clean surrounding streets.

National Night Out — Levesque Institute provided sponsorship to support the event in partnership with law enforcement, Highland and Garden Avenue Block Club, community partners, and local vendors. National Night Out promotes safety, trust and neighborhood pride. The event was held at Gill Creek in Niagara Falls, N.Y.

Men Standing Stronger Community Youth Fun Day — Hosted annually at Gluck Park in Niagara Falls, this event brought together families, youth, and community organizations to celebrate wellness, recreation, and family engagement. Levesque supports the event each year through sponsorship for youth activities and volunteer recruitment.

Niagara Falls City School District (NFCSD) Kindergarten Jamboree — The institute annually supports incoming kindergarteners and families with literacy readiness activities and distributed over 300 early childhood books to families.

“Our Vincentian mission calls us to walk alongside our neighbors, not ahead of them. By building authentic partnerships with community leaders and residents, Niagara University ensures that education, service, and research are not just academic exercises, but living commitments to uplift and sustain our region.”

Rev. James J. Maher, C.M.
President | Niagara University



WNY Service-Learning Summit

The Western New York Service-Learning Coalition Summit was held on November 1, 2024, in the Statler Room of Glynn Hall at Niagara University, reaching capacity with nearly 80 participants.

The summit was sponsored by the Levesque Institute through generous support from John R. Oishei Foundation.

The half-day summit, titled “High-Impact Practices with Partners Transforms the Community,” carried the theme “Weaving Connections, Strengthening Communities.” Danielle Battle, a member of The Aspen Institute’s Weave: The Social Fabric Project, delivered the keynote on authentic community partnerships.

The program also featured service-learning success stories and interactive “Table Talk” sessions with faculty, students, and community partners. Breakfast and lunch were provided. The summit is held annually and is hosted at college and university member locations.

Upcoming Events

Early Childhood Summit (2025)

WNY Service-Learning Summit (2025)

WNY Service-Learning Faculty Fellows (2026)

Future Visions Youth Entrepreneurship Program (2026)



Health and Wellness

Student-Led Projects

BIO 410: Research in Public Health and Community Wellness

Experiential learning extends beyond the classroom to address key social determinants of health. Students in Dr. Gallo's BIO 410 course partnered with the Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement and community agencies to advance public health outcomes across Niagara County through applied research-based learning.

Four public health concerns were studied and addressed:

1. Occupational Health and Safety

- Public Health Issue: Workplace safety risks in automotive facilities (chemical, noise, and welding exposure).
- Research Project: Students conducted hazard assessments and provided OSHA-aligned safety recommendations.
- Outcomes and Learning: Improved understanding of occupational health, regulatory compliance, and field data collection.

Three local businesses engaged; findings integrated into Niagara Orleans BOCES training modules.

2. Childhood Nutrition

- Public Health Issue: Poor childhood nutrition and obesity in rural Niagara County.
- Research Project: Created CALA: Children Aren't Little Adults—flyers, recipe cards, and pantry reorganization to promote balanced diets.
- Outcomes and Learning: Strengthened health education and communication skills.

Reached 450+ individuals monthly through Care-N-Share Food Pantry.

3. Digital Literacy

- Public Health Issue: Limited computer literacy among adults affecting access to health and social services.
- Research Project: Led one-on-one computer skills training at Heart, Love & Soul (email, Google Suite, online navigation).
- Outcomes and Learning: Developed instructional and interpersonal skills; enhanced digital equity for residents.

80% of trained participants continue active computer use.

4. Food Security

- Public Health Issue: Limited access to nutritious foods in low-income households.
- Research Project: Collaborated with Cornell Cooperative Extension Veggie Van to create nutrition-focused recipe cards.
- Outcomes and Learning: Applied health communication and data synthesis skills to promote healthy eating.

10,000+ produce bags distributed annually to 1,000+ residents.

Revitalization

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.

Partnering with Niagara Beautification proved to be an incredibly beneficial and meaningful experience, both for the community and those involved in the service project. This collaboration allowed us to launch a soon to be vibrant community garden—an initiative that went far beyond simply planting flowers and vegetables. It became a hub of environmental stewardship, neighborhood pride, and local engagement.

The service opportunity created through this partnership brought together a variety of impactful efforts. Starting with the creation of the community garden itself, we laid the foundation for sustainable access to fresh produce and a welcoming green space for residents. Informing the community about this free service was key, and it was heartening to see how quickly people embraced the project once they learned it was designed for everyone's benefit.

Beyond the garden, we extended our efforts to beautify the surrounding area improving the appearance of the neighborhood. A flower giveaway was another thoughtful gesture that added joy and color to the initiative, while also symbolizing the blossoming of a community coming together. On the more technical side, we worked to make the garden sustainable and functional by installing weed barriers and weatherproofing the garden boxes. These crucial steps ensured that the space would remain well-maintained and usable for seasons to come.

It was not just about improving physical space—it was about planting seeds of pride, cooperation, and long-term growth in the heart of the neighborhood.



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 approximately 100 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.

- Project Based Learning
- Experiential Learning
- Service Learning
- NUMO Community Service Day

IMPACT CONNECTS DATABASE

836

new registered users

1035

Impact Connects
Community partners

123

clubs and courses registered
with Impact Connects

\$3,321,381.74

2025 Economic Impact Value

41,160

service hour opportunities

IMPACT Through Experiential Learning: Leadership, Teamwork, and Student Engagement

At Niagara University, experiential learning is a hallmark of Vincentian education—connecting knowledge with action to strengthen both students and the community. In Mitch Alegre’s Leadership and Teamwork course, students applied classroom theory through a civic engagement project that directly benefited the campus community. Supported by the Levesque Institute for Civic Engagement, the project followed the full cycle of project-based learning—researching community needs, designing solutions, implementing initiatives, and assessing outcomes.

Through this structured collaboration, students developed leadership, communication, and teamwork skills while examining how service-learning advances civic responsibility across higher education. Their project, valued at \$18,000 in collective economic impact, exemplified the transformative power of applied learning. The Levesque Institute played a vital role by providing mentorship, community partnerships, and evaluation tools that guided students through each phase of their work.

This initiative illustrates how faculty-guided, student-driven service projects can bridge academics and action—advancing Niagara’s mission and creating measurable change. By integrating research, leadership, and service into coursework, the Levesque Institute helps shape purposeful leaders who extend Niagara’s Vincentian values beyond the classroom and into the broader community.

Lois Lyons Brennan Scholars

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 27 Brennan Scholarship recipients on the Niagara University Lewiston Campus. A new cohort of students is selected each year.

Welcome Class of 2029 Lois Lyons Brennan Scholars

Alexis Baurle — Education 1-6, Childhood and Special Education

Kayla Darling — Nursing - 4 Year

Noella Christelle Moyen — Biochemistry

Ivan Rankin Jr. — Psychology/BA

Camilo Reina Martinez — Psychology/BA

Jack Dennis Sauer — Academic and Career Exploration

Corrine Nicole Sheehan — Education 7-12, English

KaNiya Theresa Tobree Thomas — Education 7-12, English

Scholars in Action

Spotlight: Alannah Solomon, '25

Alannah Solomon was a member of the inaugural cohort of Lois Lyon Brennan Scholars (Class of 2026). Majoring in Psychology, she graduated one year early, demonstrating her exceptional academic focus and determination. Alannah was an active, kind-spirited, and hard-working student who became an essential support to her peers—regularly attending meetings, offering encouragement, and contributing to the program’s overall success. Her steady presence helped foster a culture of collaboration and positivity within the cohort.

Alannah is currently pursuing her master’s degree in School Counseling at the University at Buffalo, continuing her commitment to education, service, and student success.

“Alannah’s steady encouragement and caring leadership kept our group connected and motivated. She wasn’t just a student—she was the glue that held everything together.”

Christina Reina Martinez, '26



Media Highlight

What's Next: WBFO/NPR Radio

In Fall 2024, the Levesque Institute's impact and Niagara University's commitment to revitalization in Niagara Falls were featured on WBFO/NPR's program What's Next. Dr. Karen Kwandrans, Vice President of Government and Community Relations, and Rhonda Bivins-Talley, Executive Director of the Levesque Institute, were invited as guests to share the Institute's vision and outcomes.

WBFO Associate Producer Michael Loss (NU Class of 2024) coordinated the opportunity, underscoring the strong connections between Niagara University alumni and the Institute's ongoing work.

The conversation highlighted Niagara University's role in advancing community revitalization through education pipelines, service-learning, and strategic partnerships, as well as the Levesque Institute's four pillars of Education, Community Outreach, Health and Wellness, and Revitalization. The broadcast served as a powerful demonstration of leadership support, the University's Vincentian mission in action, and the Institute's measurable impact in the community.



Photo Gallery



Bridges to Excellence Forensic Science Lab with Dr. Gallo



Early College Students at Niagara Falls Culinary Institute



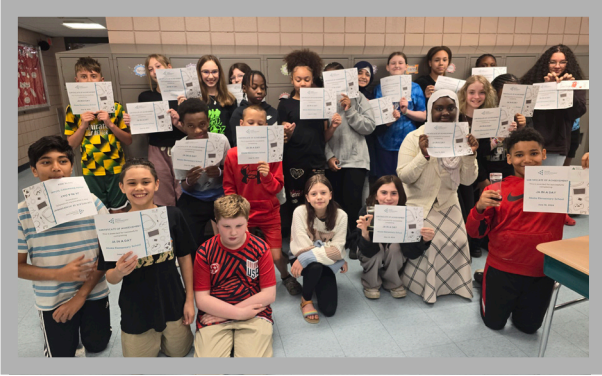
Bridges to Excellence Art Therapy Session at Canvas Crashers



Critical Literacy Program Campus Visit



National Night Out 2024 at Legends Park



JA (Junior Achievement) in a Day - Harry F. Abate Elementary School Students



Niagara Area Habitat for Humanity Rock the Block



Rev. James J. Maher, C.M., with WNY Service-Learning Coalition Summit Keynote Speaker Danielle Battle



NU Students Assisting with the Turkey Giveaway at Henry J. Kalfas Elementary



Niagara Beautification Commission Green Acres Garden

