Title: Engaged Learning Across the Disciplines: The Ascension Parish Report

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ABSTRACT

This report focuses on the Ascension Parish Project’s multidisciplinary aspects. Students worked on a variety of projects with the community partners as part of their academic courses. These academic-based projects were created to reflect the Ascension Parish’s wish to develop more appropriate and useful responses to the multicultural community it finds itself serving. This project partners faculty and students from the University of Saint Thomas with community partners in an effort to find ways to nurture the neighborhood, and how Ascension Parish can reach out to help to sustain the area’s vitality thereby forging a stronger proactive presence in the community.
Engaged Learning Across the Disciplines: The Ascension Parish Report

By
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This report focuses on the interdisciplinary nature of the Ascension Parish Project: ways in which students, faculty, and the community partners work together across academic boundaries to provide meaningful information to the administrators of Ascension Parish. Interdisciplinary cooperation and sharing of learning have been longed-for goals of many teachers, especially in a world that has become so multifaceted that the knowledge from only one discipline can serve to inform a person in limited ways. Ironically, institutions of higher learning often have fostered the separation of the disciplines in their search for better governance and efficiency. The result has been a sense of isolation and a lack of sharing of ideas among the disciplines.

This situation has led some academics to seek new and innovative ways of reaching beyond their silos to make intellectual contact. This contact takes many forms, as well it should. This presentation will discuss the format that 11 professors and approximately 300 students at the University of Saint
Thomas selected in their efforts to provide an interdisciplinary experience for themselves and their students. (See Appendix II)

The **overall goal** of the project was to find ways for student, faculty, and community partners to work together across academic boundaries to provide meaningful information to the community partners. **The functional goal** of the project was to aid the Ascension Parish, in North Minneapolis, to discover its past and its present in order to plan its future in which it will have to be prepared to serve the needs of a changing group of parishioners with which it has had little experience. The Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest wanted to find new ways to reach out into the community in order to share with the Jay Phillips Center for Jewish and Christian Learning the opportunity to foster Jewish-Christian relations in the North Minneapolis and beyond its boarders. The goals for the University of Saint Thomas stakeholders were: 1) to teach acceptance of diversity, 2) to increase service-learning opportunities across the curriculum, 3) create multidisciplinary partnerships, and 4) to use our knowledge in ways to help effect change in the community. This presentation briefly discusses the history of the area, the parish and the interdisciplinary approach we decided upon in response to the needs expressed by the parish to better serve the parish’s evolving population. It focuses on the following pedagogical issues:

- Application of classroom-based learning to community problems
- Development of cross-disciplinary perspectives among students
• Enhancement of students’ social engagement and civic participation

• Creation of interdisciplinary-based activities to reduce xenophobia, racism, homophobia, and anti-Semitism

In addition, this presentation will highlight the part of the project carried out by the students of my Hispanic Themes course as an example of the types of learning and sharing students and faculty alike enjoyed as we brought our combined knowledge from our disciplines to bear on the challenge presented by the Ascension Parish’s need to provide for a new type of parishioners.

**History of the area and of the Ascension Parish**

North Minneapolis has seen many ethnic and racial groups come and go over several decades. First settled predominantly by Irish, Germans and Poles, the area served as home to various religious groups as well. Among them were the Catholics and many eastern European Jewish families who became a dominant force in the area for several decades. People of these varied groups coexisted rather peacefully and the area grew economically until the 1960’s when a freeway was planned to cut through the area for the convenience of motorists and to the detriment of the area’s sense of community and rich history. Other reasons for the exodus of residents was the economic security many families began to attain and the consequent search for a more prestigious neighborhood in which to reside. The
descendants of the original settlers to the area began to leave in large numbers, leaving the area open to other groups in search of low-priced housing and an enclave in which they could feel secure and less effected by discrimination and prejudice.

Through all of these times of building and growth, as well the periods of population loss, the Ascension Parish stood as a symbol of stability that, to this day, helps define the community and what is happening in it. Once a parish to over 2000 households, it now struggles to survive with a scant 10% of that number of families. In addition, the racial and ethnic composition of much of the new parishioner base no longer is made up of the typical Irish, German, or Polish Catholics as in the past. Today the Parish is primarily African-American, Latino, Southeast Asian, and West African. These new parishioners represent the current multicultural flavor the area has assumed. Unaccustomed to these new demands on resources, the Parish is in need of ideas as to how to accommodate these new parishioners and their diverse sets of expectations and spiritual needs, unite the Parish’s past with its present, and plan for a future that must focus on a more diverse and community-based approach to serving the every-day and spiritual needs of the new parishioners.

**What We Did.**

The Parish administrators felt that an appeal to ex-parishioners’ sense of community, and the need to establish that same feeling of sharing and
belonging among its new parishioners would provide a much-needed historical continuity that was not present because of the high exit rate from the neighborhood. We felt that one way to help the Parish to attain its goal was to look at what these people’s lives are like, who the other organizations in the community are, what they do to nurture the neighborhood, and how Ascension Parish can reach out and help to sustain the area’s vitality so that these new parishioners feel a sense of community and commitment to their particular circumstances. Faculty designed course units or dedicated entire courses to activities that would contribute to the above goal. (Please see Appendix III) In this way, the Ascension project partners faculty and students from the University of Saint Thomas, with Ascension Parish, the Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest, and the Jay Phillips Center for Jewish and Christian Learning. The last two organizations work to increase inter-religious dialogue and understanding.

They wanted to document how Ascension Parish members perceived people outside their community, specifically Jews and Blacks. People do define themselves through both core values they are taught as well as how they differ from others. Since there was interaction with non-Ascension members through school, sports, North Commons social events, etc., it was of particular interest to identity formation and inter-group relations.

Students in History, Geography, Public Relations, Spanish, Communications, Sociology, Health, Theology, Art History and Marketing
Research are working on a variety of projects with the community partners as part of their courses. There is a series of speakers and other events open to the general community and Saint Thomas faculty and students. The project culminates in a celebratory event at which students, faculty, community members, and all engaged in the project share their results. The tangible outcomes of students’ work include: oral histories, geographical maps, written reports, web-based archives, web-based documentation, and a needs assessment of the new parishioners, especially the Latinos, the fastest growing segment of the Parish. Once the results of the projects that students and teachers from the 9 academic disciplines that participated in this endeavor are completed and combined, the fruits of this interdisciplinary approach will become evident for all stakeholders: community partners, UST faculty, and UST students. Plans to disseminate the results of this project are a seminal aspect to our conceptualization of this interdisciplinary project.

**Oral Histories:**

Only one study has been made to document life in the area over a period of time. The Jewish Historical Society of the Upper Midwest focused on the Jewish population; how it grew to prominence in the area, its apogee and zenith. But, no study has been made that chronicles the impact the Catholic presence has had on the area and its residence for more than 110 years at the Ascension Parish alone. One group of teachers and students dedicated their efforts to establish an historical perspective through which
the Ascension Parish administrators might be able to identify possible ways to connect the past with the present during their upcoming campaign drive. Central to this effort were oral interviews from past parishioner who over the years have moved from the Parish but who were very willing to share their insights about the role the Parish played in their younger years. The oral histories aimed to document changing family patterns and structures, assimilation practices, changes in moral behavior in response to social and economic factors that mitigated in the choice to stay or to leave the area.

Histories also were taken from current parishioners to gain a comparative perspective of needs and expectations. Among them were representatives of the newest group of parishioners: Hispanics from a variety of countries. These people represent the fastest growing segment of the Parish’s population, yet, they present an enigma at this time. The majority of them do not reside in the same postal code area as does the Parish. They come to the Spanish mass on Sundays and then return to their homes, to be seen only rarely at the Parish during the week. We will come back to this situation when I discuss my students’ role in this project.

**Geographical Maps:**

Student in a Geography course carried out a mapping project this past summer in order to document changes in Parish density, race, income, and age of parishioners. This information will combine with that gathered by the students in the other courses to form a profile of the Parish and the area it
intends to serve. Included in the profile is information about major 
businesses, services for children and the elderly, availability of affordable 
housing, and the religious and ethnic groups in the area.

**Research, Reports and Projects:**

In the fall term of 2002, students in three Journalism courses 
collaborated to produce several efforts. The Photo Journalism students took 
pictures of the community and of the Parish while the students in the 
Advanced Reporting course were assigned to develop stories about the 
community using the Parish as a focal point. The students combined the 
Photos and the reports to produce Photo Features that could be used in the 
PR plan addressed by another group of students and Parish stakeholders.

At the same time, teams of Public Relations students and Ascension 
workers met to plan publicity campaigns for the Parish’s upcoming 
fundraising campaign as well as a plan intended to foster acceptance of 
Service Learning at all levels on the university’s campus. Another group of 
students in a Marketing course administered a survey to the parishioners 
concerning demographics and household composition. This survey was 
conducted in English and Spanish. (See Appendix I) Also, students in a 
couple of History courses used the collaborative opportunity to gather 
information about post-WWII history through the eyes of area’s residents 
from that era.

**Web Sites:**
Another group of History students has taken on the challenging task of gathering Parish material that they will archive on a web site so the Parish can have a permanent remembrance of its past that is available to the entire world. As many of the documents and materials produced through the project will be archived on the web site to serve as testimony to our efforts, and as a model other faculty and community partners may wish to use. A second site will house a history of our project including a description of the project, plans, participants, a threaded discussion board, documents produced by faculty and students during the project, as well as announcements of related campus and community events.

**Needs Assessment:**

Students in my Hispanic Themes course study issues related to the Hispanic presence in the United States. Ascension Parish serves as a living example of the impact their presence can have on a community or a Parish as they attempt to accommodate these people’s various needs and expectations. The students will collaborate with the Ascension Parish staff to develop a Needs Assessment survey. The oral survey will be in Spanish and administered by pairs of students. Since Latinos comprise the fastest growing segment of the Parish, Ascension wants to know their needs and expectations concerning spirituality, community services, education, and health care.
Native speakers will translate the instrument to insure correctness of language and cultural appropriateness. Students will compare their own attempts to produce a Spanish version of the survey in Spanish as an exercise in what it takes to produce a reliable instrument in another language. Once the oral surveys have been recorded, the students will transcribe the responses and begin to categorize them for ease of reference and use by the Ascension staff.

They also will use that data to broaden their knowledge of the issues we will be studying in class through films, readings and discussions of what defines the Hispanic presence in our society. Students will note similarities and differences in needs and expectations that might emerge between the Hispanic informants and members of the dominant culture in the U.S.

**Bringing It Together:**

This project is a work in progress, and therefore, it is not possible to delineate exactly all of the implications for interdisciplinary activities that could accrue once the project has ended. The multidisciplinary nature of the project is evident and it is the task of the stakeholders, especially those from the University of Saint Thomas to identify areas of interface among the academic areas that participated in the project. In addition, it is our charge to bring the fruits of our efforts to the students and faculty of the university as being a strong example of what can be done across academic boundaries and “beyond the arches” of the academic environment. Parallel to this aim is
the objective of reaching out into the community to establish strong ties and new cooperative arrangements that stem from our initial efforts.

Several activities have been planned that address the above challenges, but more will be identified and implemented as possible. First among many was participation by some of the project students and faculty in a Parish Homecoming at which they were able to see samples of how the Journalism student were able to meld together academic learning in the form of the Photo Features that gave a peek into the past of the Parish. This opportunity sparked an interest in the ex-parishioners who had returned on this special day to honor the Parish as a significant influence in their lives. These visual images of their past spurred many of them to volunteer to participate in the oral history component of the project.

In October, a diverse panel of stakeholders in the community came together to present their views about the past, present and future of North Minneapolis that has had so many faces over the years. Student were able to verify some of the learning they accumulated during their research of the area, the Photo Features they produced, and the interviews they will have completed. The discussion served as a framing device for the types of questions the Ascension Project hopes to answer. It also provided a forum through which students and faculty engaged in the project could begin a dialogue about the interrelatedness of our efforts.
Other events will highlight various aspects of the project. A principal goal was to increase awareness on campus of issues of diversity as they related to the project. To this end, we will sponsor three events that present various perspectives of the issues surrounding diversity, prejudice and how to resolve those issues. We will invite people to a showing of “To Kill A Mocking Bird” followed by open discussion of the themes it presents, a panel of two rabbis and a priest to discuss the Laramie Project, and a presentation by Eugene Pogany entitled: “In My Brother’s Image” about twin brothers separated by faith after the Holocaust.

Other opportunities for sharing what we have learned will come in the form of poster sessions at the Ascension Parish and on campus highlighting our projects, and possible team taught course in the future that aim to extend the types of multidisciplinary experiences we created in this project with out community partners. Many suggestions will be proffered in the debriefing sessions we will have for participating community and university partners as we take the time to assess what we have accomplished and where these ideas can lead us.

**Assessment:**

Students will take a pre-and post-test measure of attitudes towards diversity, either the Bogardus or one similar to it. All faculty will use the same instrument and may add other items to evaluate specific course goals, outcomes, or activity. Focus groups will attempt to help students discuss
their projects and ways they might include other disciplines in their future studies.

Faculty and community partners: Ascension staff and participants from the two Jewish organizations will have open discussions throughout the academic year to refine the process as needed, but especially to identify ways to enrich the interdisciplinary nature of this project and those we hope will flow from this one.
Appendix I:
Bi-lingual Survey For Parishioners

Gracias por su participación en esta encuesta. Esta encuesta se administra a través de una clase de mercadeo en la Universidad de Santo Tomás en colaboración con la Iglesia de Ascensión. Este proyecto trata de explorar el pasado, presente y futuro de la Parroquia Ascensión y la vecindad en la cual rezamos. El propósito de esta encuesta es tomar un “snapshot” de las personas que asisten a misa el sábado y domingo, 12 y 13 de octubre, 2002.

Esta encuesta será usada solamente con el propósito de descubrir la demografía actual y las experiencias de las personas que participen en esta encuesta. Toda información proveída será confidencial.

***Favor de marcar solamente un cuadro o de escribir su respuesta a cada una de las siguientes preguntas sobre su involucramiento en la parroquia Ascensión:

1. ¿Cuántas veces Ud. ha asistido a misa en la Iglesia Ascensión en el último mes? ______ (veces)
2. ¿Es Ud. miembro de la parroquia Ascensión?
   Sí. ___ ¿Por cuántos años? ______
   No. ___ ¿Le gustaría hacerse miembro? Sí____ No___
3. Por favor indique cuántas millas (aproximadamente) ha viajado para asistir a misa hoy:
   ___0 a 5 ___16 a 20
   ___6 a 10 ___21 a 25
   ___11 a 15 ___26 o más millas
4. ¿Por qué viene a rezar a la Parroquia Ascensión?
5. ¿Cuáles son las ventajas de esta parroquia?
6. Con miras hacia el futuro, ¿según Ud. qué podría mejorar a la Parroquia Ascensión?

***Favor de marcar solamente un cuadro o de escribir su respuesta a cada una de las siguientes preguntas sobre su persona:

1. Sexo: masculino___ femenino___
2. Edad: menor de 21 años__ 46 a 54 años__ 55 o más años
   21 a 35 años__ 36 a 45 años__
3. Estado civil: (marque uno)
   ___casado/a ___divorciado/a
   ___soltero/a ___viudo/a
4. Raza:
   ___blanco/caucasoide   ___mexicano americano
   ___africano americano/negro   ___puertorriqueño
   ___asiático americano/asiático   ___latino
   ___indio americano   ___otro

5. ¿Actualmente está Ud. empleado?
   Sí   No
   ¿Qué tipo de trabajo hace? ________________________________

7. Educación:
   ___Alguna escuela secundaria   ___Bachillerato/Licenciatura
   ___Graduado de escuela secundaria   ___Post bachillerato/licenciatura
   ___Grado asociado/algún estudio universitario

8. ¿Vive Ud. en un apartamento o casa?
   ___Casa   ___Apartamento

9. ¿Cuál es el código postal de su residencia? ________________

10. Por favor enumere los miembros actuales de su hogar. Inclúyase a Ud. primero. Indique el sexo, edad y su relación con la persona.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexo (M/F)</th>
<th>Edad</th>
<th>Relación</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Yo</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. ¿Cuál es el idioma que principalmente se habla en su hogar? ________________

12. ¿Cuál es su sueldo anual?
   ___Menos de $20,000   ___$35,000 a $50,000
   ___$20,000 a $35,000   ___$50,001 o más

***Gracias por su participación en esta encuesta. Los estudiantes de la Universidad de Santo Tomás del semestre entrante harán unas entrevistas sobre su involucramiento y experiencias en la Iglesia de Ascensión para ayudarnos a servirles mejor. Si le interesa, lo invitamos a que venga a una de las mesas en la parte posterior de la iglesia. Si le interesa tener información sobre la membresía o si quiere que alguien lo contacte directamente, favor de dejarnos saber.
Thank you for participating in this survey. This survey is being administered through a marketing class at the University of St. Thomas in collaboration with Church of Ascension. This project seeks to explore the past, present and future of Ascension Parish and the neighborhood in which we worship. The intent of this survey is to give us a "snapshot" of the people attending the Saturday and Sunday masses on October 12-13, 2002.

This survey will be used only for the purpose of discovering the current demographics and experience of those individuals participating in the survey. All individual information offered will be kept confidential.

***Please mark only one box or write your response to the following questions that pertain to your involvement with Ascension Parish:

1. How often have you attended mass at Ascension in the last month? _______________ (times)

2. Are you currently a member of the Ascension Parish?
   - Yes
   - For how many years? __________
   - No
   - Would you like to become a member? Yes No

3. Please indicate how many miles you have traveled to attend mass at Ascension today:
   - 0 to 5
   - 6 to 10
   - 11 to 15
   - 16 to 20
   - 21 to 25
   - 26 or more

4. Why do you choose to worship at Ascension Parish?
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________

5. What do you view as the strengths of the Parish?
   __________________________________________________________
   __________________________________________________________
6. In doing future planning, what do you think could strengthen Ascension Parish?

___________________________________________________________

***Please mark only one box or write your response to the following questions that pertain to your general background:

1. Gender:       Male    Female

2. Age:
    Under 21   46 to 54   55 and over
    21 to 35   36 to 45

3. Marital status: (Mark one)
    Married
    Divorced
    Single
    Widowed

4. Race:
    White/Caucasian
    Mexican American
    African American/Black
    Puerto Rican American
    Asian American/Asian
    Latino__________________
    American Indian
    Other___________________

5. Are you currently employed?
    Yes       No
    What kind of work do you currently do?_____________________________

6. Education Completed:
    Some High School
    Bachelor’s Degree
    High School Graduate
    Post-Graduate
    Degree
    Some College/Associate’s Degree

7. Do you currently live in an apartment or home?
    Home
    Apartment

8. Do you own or rent your current residence?
    Rent
    Own

9. Zip code of your current address__________________________
10. Please list the current members of your household, including yourself, by gender, age, and relation to you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender (M/F)</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Relationship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Myself</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. What is the primary language spoken in your home?_______________________

12. Please indicate your annual income:
   - Less than $20,000
   - $20,000 to $35,000
   - $35,001 to $50,000
   - $50,001 or more

*** Thank you for participating in this survey. This spring students from the University of St. Thomas will be conducting interviews regarding your involvement and experiences at the Church of Ascension to help us better serve you. If you’re interested, we invite you to sign up at the table in the rear of the church. If you’re interested in membership information, or would like a staff member to contact you directly, please let us know that also.
Appendix II: Project Benefits for Its Partners

Each of the partners in the project benefits in specific ways.

Ascension Parish
- documents its past and have information for shaping its future.
- creates opportunities to link past and present parishioners and neighbors.
- develops opportunities for relationships with other community institutions
- partners with Jewish organizations in the ongoing commitment to Christian-Jewish dialogue

The University of St. Thomas
- move its students towards a greater acceptance of diversity in many forms - religious, racial, ethnic, and economic.
- offers opportunities for interdisciplinary teaching and learning.
- provides meaningful service to Ascension Parish.

The Jay Phillips Center for Jewish-Christian Learning
- expands its mission of facilitating inter-religious events that increase the acceptance of diversity.

The Jewish Historical Society
- adds a new dimension to its understanding of the North Side.
- partners with the University of St. Thomas, Ascension, and the Center for Jewish-Christian Learning to reduce anti-Semitism among UST students.
- works with faculty across many academic disciplines as consultants on oral histories and as experts on the history of the North Side.
### Appendix III

#### Ascension Project Courses by Semester

**Ascension Project Courses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professor</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spring 2002</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeanne Steele</td>
<td>Jour 450 – Advanced PR</td>
<td>W 3:00-5:00</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Summer 2002</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Paul Lorah</td>
<td>Geog 489 – Independent Studies</td>
<td>TBA</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Fall 2002</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winston Chrislock</td>
<td>Hist 333 – Eastern Europe since 1914</td>
<td>TR 9:55-11:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Fitzharris</td>
<td>Hist 113 – Early America – Global Persp.</td>
<td>MWF 9:35-10:40</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Spring 2003</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernie Brady</td>
<td>Theo 325 – Catholic Social Tradition</td>
<td>TR 9:55-11:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carol Bruess</td>
<td>Comm 425 – Family Communication</td>
<td>TR 9:55-11:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barry Cytron</td>
<td>Theo 321 – Modern Judaisms</td>
<td>MWF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellen Kennedy</td>
<td>Soc 351 – Immigration, Fear, and Hate</td>
<td>TR 1:30-11:35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructor</td>
<td>Course</td>
<td>Time</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dick Raschio</td>
<td>Span 330 – Temas Hispanicos</td>
<td>MWF 1:35-2:40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cynthia Becker</td>
<td>Art History – African Art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Fitzharris</td>
<td>web development as needed</td>
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