Faculty in the First Year Writing Program at St. John’s Institute for Writing Studies (IWS) are collaborating with the University’s Office of Academic Service-Learning to facilitate experiential learning and reflective writing efforts for students in the required first-year writing course, English 1000C (English Composition).

In the First Year Writing Program, which introduces students to research, the conventions of academic writing, and critical thinking, faculty design their curricula around theories of composition, literary studies, and creative writing, among others genres and types of texts. More and more they’re including an academic service-learning (AS-L) component.

St. John’s writing professor, Sean Murray, Ph.D challenges incoming freshman to critically examine a particular belief or experience and to become stewards in the community through civic engagement and creative writing reflection. His curriculum offers students the opportunity to serve at site locations specific to their field of interest such as Ozanam Hall Nursing Home.

“Community work can be the spring board for AS-L analysis, Dr. Murray adds. “I incorporate open-ended assignments that ideally target a student’s interest in a particular community agency rather than selecting a place for them to volunteer and write about.”

AS-L allows students to experience a “think-outside-of-the-box” style of traditional education. Students enrich their college experience through academic service-learning and acquire writing skills ranging from developing mission statements and brochures to personal essay composition.

Reflecting on her involvement at the Ozanam Nursing Home, freshman Priscilla Aguilar says she was amazed at the wealth of experience she gained through her academic service-learning. “It allows you to learn something that you cannot in the classroom. I believe that academic service-learning is a great way to connect what you learn in school to helping out your community. By participating in this experience, I learned more about the elderly and it was great to know that I brought a smile to their faces.”
According to Dr. Murray, in order to stay abreast of AS-L best practices, writing faculty members must ask themselves two key questions: What possibilities does AS-L present for composition? What possibilities does composition present for AS-L? By closely examining these connections, he says, faculty can create the kinds of assignments that promote social justice and analytical thinking among our students.

St. John’s Vincentian mission of serving those who are socially, economically or physically disadvantaged underlies AS-L initiatives. Dr. Murray’s belief in service and academic excellence led him to include AS-L into his writing curriculum.

“My vision of AS-L is a method of getting students outside the classroom and thinking about the choices they make as part of the larger social fabric,” Dr. Murray adds. “They become part of the community; break down walls and connect with people beyond the campus in meaningful ways.”

Academic Service-Learning helps foster civic responsibility; is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of students; and includes structured time for students to reflect on the service experience. It is an integral component of the University’s new Vincentian Institute for Social Action (VISA), which was created to support the perpetuation of the University’s Vincentian mission and to provide an academic platform for students and faculty to address issues of global poverty and social injustice through teaching, research and service. A key aspect of VISA is the development and strengthening of strategic partnerships with organizations and programs that provide services and assistance to those most in need locally, nationally and internationally.