

## **Office of Community Engagement Strategic Planning**

Summary Report  
April 2005

### **Executive Summary**

Early in 2005 we held several strategic planning sessions to review Calvin's past accomplishments in the scholarship of engagement and to consider how to deepen this work at Calvin in the next five to ten years. We considered particular strengths and weaknesses we have as an institution of Christian higher education as well as particular opportunities and risks we face at this point in history. These considerations served as a foundation for thinking strategically about the future.

Four broad areas of interest are emerging which are capturing the attention of a number of Calvin faculty and staff in response either to current needs or to particular issues existing within the Grand Rapids community—environmental sustainability, urban revitalization, literacy, and racial reconciliation.

### ***Environmental Sustainability***

Environmental sustainability has been identified by Mayor George Heartwell as a major thrust of his administration and Calvin faculty have been working for some years to address this and related issues through the Calvin Environmental Assessment Program (CEAP) and a new watershed initiative called the Plaster Creek Working Group. These initiatives provide opportunities to weave together curricular content and teaching with research capabilities to study specific issues facing West Michigan. Calvin faculty and students are involved in environmental research and are partnering with other organizations to promote a sustainable future.

### ***Urban Revitalization***

Stabilizing the core city which has suffered economic disinvestment and abandonment by the middle class (as have many cities) remains a pressing issue for Grand Rapids. Housing, business development, education and health care are some of the issues Calvin College has been involved in through its Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) in Burton Heights. The Nursing Department has initiated a community-based curriculum

focusing on three Grand Rapids neighborhoods—Burton Heights/Garfield Park; Baxter/Madison; Creston/Belknap. Strong consensus emerged at the strategic planning sessions to continue this three-neighborhood focus and to expand our engaged scholarship work to include other departments and faculty. One possible example is to deepen our work with Get the Lead Out, a community collaborative working to address childhood lead poisoning by involving faculty from sociology and chemistry, along with the nursing department to focus work in these three neighborhoods.

### ***Literacy***

Literacy has been identified as a major issue facing the Grand Rapids community and in the fall of 2004 the first Grand Rapids Community Literacy Summit was held. Not only is this an issue which affects children learning to read but it is also affects a significant portion of the adult population in Grand Rapids (21% of the adult population in Greater Grand Rapids is functionally illiterate in their first language). Calvin has a long history of being involved in literacy issues through students in education classes tutoring in schools and libraries or through English as a Second Language tutoring, through the Service-Learning Center, and through faculty in our Education, English and CAS departments doing research to improve literacy. As an institution of higher education, we care deeply about education in Grand Rapids and recognize we have an important and growing contribution to make in this area.

### ***Racial Reconciliation***

Calvin has made intentional decisions to focus on becoming an anti-racist institution and to promote racial reconciliation with the development of the [From Every Nation](#) (FEN) document and through the on-going work of the Calvin Anti-Racism Team (CART). Those involved in the strategic planning for engaged scholarship acknowledge anti-racism and racial reconciliation as an on-going challenge and continuing priority in community engagement as well. One potential way this work could go forward is through the expansion of the Community Voices Project, an oral history initiative involving students and faculty in the English, History, Spanish, and CAS departments in community-based research. This project was initiated several years ago but has not been nurtured or developed in a serious way. The Community Voices Project has potential to bridge racial and ethnic differences and to give voice to those who have been marginalized in the past.

Those involved in the strategic planning spoke at length about the many possible connections between these four priority areas and the potential for cross-fertilization. Projects with longer term viability should take priority as we focus our efforts. These emerging areas of interest grow out of past work Calvin faculty and staff have undertaken as well as particular interests and experience that have evolved in recent years. Note that the priority areas identified in 1998 through a Calvin survey were education, core city issues, and race. These current priorities reflect both a desire to focus and deepen our community engagement scholarship and to expand in several new ways.