Community Engagement VC Foreword and Website Message

From modest beginnings a few years ago, the continuing development of our Community Engagement (CE) programme, including service learning, community social development and the student volunteer programme in the capable hands of our Community Engagement staff and the Centre for Social Development (CSD), the professionalism, thoughtfulness, passion and commitment with which the programme is being implemented, and the extent of participation by our staff and students are all immensely gratifying and sources of great pride for Rhodes University.

Our University's mission proclaims that we shall strive 'through community service to contribute to the development of the Eastern Cape', and that we shall 'foster the all-round development of our students'. Our CE policy commits us to draw on our knowledge and expertise to work 'actively to improve the quality of life of individuals in Grahamstown and Eastern Cape communities', and to 'fostering an ethos of voluntary community service (among our) staff and student body, leading to well-rounded graduate citizens who will be active agents for positive social change'.

Community engagement provides the opportunities to put our commitments into practice and to exemplify our values through deeds and action. It is an attempt to harness the social commitment, knowledge, expertise and skills of our staff and students and put them to work to forge mutually respectful,

beneficial and reciprocal relationships with defined constituencies, institutions, organisations, groups and individuals.

The interactions that are sought are of mutual value, in that as much as we seek to help build the institutional capabilities of specific institutions and organisations, and the capacities of particular defined constituencies and individuals, we also seek to develop as individuals and citizens, and as an institution, through a process of discovery, listening, understanding and contributing. As one of our student volunteers, Cassidy Parker, has commented, 'volunteering has taught me about myself and my relationship to people and the world around me in ways that no text book on philosophy or economics ever could'.

Necessary and invaluable as academic disciplines and formal study are, the reality is that there is a limit to how much you can learn, develop, and discover yourself through books, lectures and essays alone. There is simply no substitute for actual involvement in student, youth, and community organisations and projects and issue-based movements if one wishes to acquire more knowledge, further enhance one's understanding of the world, and extend one's skills and competencies.

CE is a bridge to the acquisition on the part of our students, staff and the University as a whole of more knowledge and greater awareness and understanding of social realities, and the development on the art of staff and students of new and additional skills and competencies. At the same time, it represents a necessary and welcome engagement on the part of the different sections of the

Rhodes community with the social ills, problems, and challenges of our town and exemplifies the commitment to address these.

Finally, it helps us as an institution to give further expression to the ideas of universities promoting critical and democratic citizenship, contributing to widening educational and social opportunities and to local economic and social development, and advancing the public good.

As we develop our CE programme, we need to consider whether we are not working on too diverse a front with the possible dangers of our energies being dissipated and our effectiveness being compromised. A few focused long-term initiatives and partnerships could be potentially more rewarding.

One is an iRhini/Grahamstown schools partnership that involves Rhodes University, the historically disadvantaged schools, the 'Model C' and private schools, non-government organisations, the Department of Education, the teacher unions and donors, with goals of systematically building the capabilities of the historically disadvantaged schools so that they can realize the potential of their students, and graduate significantly larger numbers of students that can attend universities, including Rhodes.

The other is a partnership with Makana Municipality and other key role players in which we contribute our knowledge and expertise to support local institutions to enhance economic and social development, widen people's opportunities for economic and social advancement, and meet the basic needs of people.

In both cases, it is about mutually and clearly defining our working principles and goals, and ensuring greater and more effective co-ordination of activities in which we may be already involved. Undertaken successfully, both partnerships could yield tremendous mutual benefits for iRhini/Grahamstown and Rhodes.

We are incredibly fortunate to have at Rhodes the Centre for Social Development. The CSD has long been a vital force for educational, community and social development, equity and justice in iRhini/Grahamstown and the wider Eastern Cape, and without its expertise and experience and the trust that it enjoys it is doubtful whether we would be able to mount the successful student volunteer programme that we currently have.

In the past few years our overall CE programme has made great strides. Through the passion and determination of the CE staff, we have made significant headway and there have been notable achievements. For one, we are on well on the road to a much more rigorous conceptualisation of community engagement at Rhodes and its implications for our practices. For another, we will soon have in place a Director of Community Engagement to spearhead our community initiatives instead of the current post of Manager.

Further, we now also have, alongside the Vice-Chancellor's awards for book publishing, research and teaching, a Vice-Chancellor's award for community engagement with the contribution being publicly acknowledged at one of our graduation ceremonies early next year. And not least, the CSD and CE will move into larger premises in Prince Alfred Street next year.

The Rhodes University slogan proclaims that we aspire to be a place *Where Leaders Learn* and the Rhodes motto is *Truth, Virtue, Strength*!

The participants in our CE programme give concrete expression to the idea of engaged and selfless leadership and service to community. They indeed, pursue the Truth that derives from knowledge, understanding and reason, practice the Virtue of social commitment, compassion and giving, and possess the Strength of courage and boldness to strive to remake our society so that all may possess the social, economic and human rights and opportunities that are fundamental to living full, decent, productive, rich and rewarding lives.

The CE programme as a whole is a great ambassador for what Rhodes, alongside its outstanding academic reputation, also wishes to be renowned, and its development and achievements are an integral part of the goal of being a small great University.