The College has opened the Office of Service-Learning (OSL) to promote service-learning on- and off-campus and to recruit and train service-learning faculty.

Part of the Institute for Civic Engagement, the office is temporarily located in Old Main, Room 111-C, but will eventually be located in the Memorial Library's Teaching and Learning Center. The OSL can be reached at ext. 2320.

John Suarez, English, will coordinate the office, which was created by Richard Kendrick, Sociology Chair and Director of the Institute for Civic Engagement. Karla Alwes, English Department Chair, Mary Kennedy, Writing Program Coordinator, and Provost Elizabeth Davis-Russell supported creation of the new office.

Roughly 20 faculty members from 12 different departments have already taught through service-learning, Suarez explained. Students' projects have involved mentoring and tutoring, helping the disabled and the elderly, collaborating on environmental efforts, conducting data collection and needs assessment, and community education.

The Office is responsible for facilitating such work, for matching the larger community's needs with appropriate SUNY Cortland faculty, and for encouraging the development of unique course-inspired projects, he said. It also promotes service-learning to faculty and students, trains faculty in the use of service-learning, and coordinates students' community service placements. The office is charged with making service-learning convenient and productive for campus and community.

"Service-learning is an experiential learning pedagogy," explained Suarez, who has managed service-learning in the Writing Program since 1999. "Students integrate class work and community service activities into a reciprocal relationship: class work and community service inform each other. The student reinforces and personalizes her learning through structured reflection."

Suarez said structured reflection includes written journal entries, such as the following class assignment from the Political Science Department: "Miroff, et. al., distinguish between a 'process orientation' toward marketplace equality, where the government intervenes only in cases of 'biases in the rules of competition,' and a 'results orientation,' in which government intervenes on behalf of people who are perceived to be at a disadvantage. Using details from your current community service, but without using individuals' names, explain why you agree with process or with results orientation."

Structured reflection also includes class discussion, Suarez noted. "For example, students in some writing classes have reconstructed settings or events from their community service," he said. "As the students walk through those settings, or after they role-play those events, they discuss specific details and explore concepts such as connotative meanings and the importance of emotion in communication.

"The larger community benefits through students’ community service, of course, and the students and faculty benefit as well. Students' learning becomes more personally relevant, for example, and faculty engage in new and rewarding areas of scholarship."

The integration of community service and course work on the Cortland campus began in 1986 with the creation of the Cortland Student Volunteer Project. Such efforts grew and in 1994, funds from the Campus Outreach Opportunity League (COOL) helped SUNY Cortland pilot a program focusing on service-learning. In the 1999-2000 academic year, Craig Little, Sociology and Anthropology, and his team secured a Community Outreach Partnership Center (COPC) grant from the U.S.
Housing and Urban Development Office. COPC has promoted service-learning and other projects between the larger community and SUNY Cortland.

In 2000-01, SUNY Cortland faculty helped form the NY Campus Compact (NYCC), a state chapter of a national organization of college presidents dedicated to promoting service-learning in higher education. Then-President Judson H. Taylor joined the National Campus Compact in 2002, serving on the NYCC Executive Committee. President Bitterbaum is also a Campus Compact member. Meanwhile, the Career Services Office, through its director, John Shirley, began hosting Volunteer/Service-learning Fairs at the start of each semester. The event has annually attracted more than 250 students. Also that year, the English Department began offering several sections of service-learning-based composition courses.

In 2004, the College joined The American Democracy Project, and it created the Institute for Civic Engagement. Last spring, the Institute awarded stipends to five faculty to develop service-learning courses.

For more information on how to get involved with service-learning, contact Suarez at extension 2320 or at suarezj@cortland.edu.