

VINCENTIAN
ACADEMY—
DUQUESNE
UNIVERSITY



So Much To Do At Vincentian Academy

Duquesne University: Balancing Pedagogy, Activity, Community and Family

By Christopher Cussat

There is something unique about Vincentian Academy-Duquesne University. It is a sense or a feeling. It is in the air and the people. It is different...better somehow. The moment you first step foot on Vincentian Academy-Duquesne University's (VA-DUQ) campus in McCandless, you get the feeling that you are somewhere special. Although VA-DUQ is known for its outstanding academics and one of greater Pittsburgh's premier private schools, this academy's notion of education reaches far above and beyond the shelves of classroom learning and books. Vincentian considers itself more of a community above all other definitions. It is a place where students not only learn about arts, languages, sciences, mathematics and computers, but also about the fundamental lessons of life, such as the sensibilities of family, society and spirituality. VA-DUQ truly constitutes a community, whose students are connected by the common threads of caring, sharing and growing among people who share similar beliefs, values and goals.

Like many schools, academics are balanced with extra-curricular activities. Vincentian is no exception. With its athletic teams, performance groups and special interest clubs, VA-DUQ, though smaller than most public schools, offers a complete range of student activities. But the Academy does much more than just provide its' students with these offerings; it supplies everyone with opportunities to be involved. In addition, many of its' activities receive local, regional and statewide recognition.

Ninety percent of Vincentian students participate in the WPIAL sports programs. Both young men and women can play baseball or softball (alternately), bas-

ketball, soccer, field hockey (the guys are required to wear kilts!), cross country, golf and tennis, just to name a few. All teams are highly competitive; in fact, this year's girl's basketball team competed in the state championship. The amazing fact about VA-DUQ's athletic program is that it maintains a no cut policy! If a student tries out for any sport, he or she is automatically placed on that team and is guaranteed to play at least some of the time. Anyone who has been cut from a team or picked last during gym can appreciate the fairness of this system. (I know I can!) Erin Tavella is a recent VA-DUQ graduate from Franklin Park who especially appreciated Vincentian's participation policy. "One reason I left public school is because you could never participate in the activities you wanted unless you knew someone or were the best athlete in the school," she said. "But at Vincentian, if you try out, you are going to be part of it...I felt that I was someone there."

Dr. Timothy Rusnak, president of Vincentian Academy-Duquesne University, believes that this is just one example of how the school promotes a strong connection to something outside of one's self. He contends that Vincentian is a "unique environment" which "leads to a wonderful sense of community where students learn to play and grow within the context of a profound commitment to our Catholic heritage." The promise of involvement for its students uniquely allows VA-DUQ to include all students in everything they are interested in. This reinforces the participant's sense of connection to the team and school as a whole, and subsequently his or her community. He adds, "some of the finest colleges that actively recruit our students, often cite our activities, athletic programs

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and the opportunities given to students for involvement, as the most advantageous features of the school."

Vincentian's setting facilitates this feeling of connection, as the Academy is contained within its own, beautiful, 78-acre campus. It is an entirely private world, which includes all and excludes none, for as Rusnak assures, "we embrace and welcome people of all faiths and backgrounds into our receptive, ecumenical environment."

But the issuance of inclusion and participation does not end with athletics. Rusnak gleams that the Academy is "particularly excited about its emerging programs in the areas of arts and music." Pep, jazz and improvisational bands have emerged in the last two years. "Those students interested in music are guided by highly trained Vincentian faculty," Rusnak said. "In addition, they have the added benefit and support of Duquesne University's Mary Pappert School of Music." VA-DUQ's Theater and Dramatic Arts Program has produced several highly successful plays, such as last year's performance of *Godspell*. Rusnak added that the school's theater offerings "marvelously showcase our students' talents from the wide range of dramatic performers to the small student orchestra that accompanies each musical." "This current year's drama club is exciting the Academy with its plans to not only perform within the school community, but to entertain other public groups throughout the North Hills region," he said.

The permeating feelings of community, connection and inclusion are most evident exactly where they should be, within the minds, hearts and souls of Vincentian students. Nick Lehman, a recent graduate from Wexford, is currently a freshman at Duquesne University. He is an academic scholarship recipient and a member of the University's Honors College. Nick attended all four years of high school at VA-DUQ. This bright, well-spoken, perpetually smiling young man epitomizes all that is Vincentian Academy-Duquesne University. "You really see the difference," Lehman said. "By the end of your four years, Vincentian is like your second home." Asked how a school accomplishes this, Lehman said, "You have the same teachers for all of your years there and the small classes (about fifteen or less in most, with a 9:1 student/teacher ratio) make you more than just a number." The student/teacher relationships established among faculty and students are personalized and supportive. For example, Lehman

again reinforces the fact that "you feel like you are with your family...you could not bother fixing your hair one day and no one would care!" This type of environment naturally affects academics in the most positive and productive manner. "Even when academics are tough, you know that you are all going through it together," Lehman said. "Everyone shares the same experience, and through it, we can all support one another." "A school is not just about academics," he observed. "There is much more to a school than that...it is also the people."

Although the people at VA-DUQ may have the most profound affect on its students, the Academy does not shy away from its outstanding academic and community reputation. "We are very proud of our accomplishments and even more proud of our students who have each been touched by that special spirit of learning, service and involvement in our Vincentian Family," Rusnak said. Only six years ago, Vincentian Academy-Duquesne University began as a small group of thirty-five freshmen within what was then Vincentian High School. Today, they proudly boast more than 250 students in grades nine through twelve. All students are in some way focused on the International Baccalaureate (IB) program. Since 1998, VA-DUQ has graduated 110 students, who have amassed more than six million dollars in scholarship offers. Rusnak contends that all of this has happened "not only because we have a second to none academic program and outstanding teachers who care about their students, but also because we adhere to the current trend of university recruitment, which seeks the best candidates by identifying strong academic students and by recognizing each student's commitment to others through their involvement in team sports, school groups and community service." He concluded, "I think we are beginning to experience the special charism shared by the Vincentian Sisters of Charity and Duquesne's Spiritan Fathers, specifically, the Spirit that gives life."

Vincintian Academy-Duquesne University has created a complete environment of education, recreation and community. By enhancing the social component so important to any educational structure, VA-DUQ is not only creating graduates who are better students, they are graduating students who are better people. For more information or to set up an appointment call (412) 364-1616. VA-DUQ's address is Peebles and McKnight Roads, Pittsburgh, PA 15237. ▲

