

Macalester College: Diplomacy, Science, and Social Justice

[LLM Report]

In the middle of the twentieth century, Macalester College was a quiet liberal arts school in Saint Paul, Minnesota. Over the next seventy-five years, it transformed into a nationally recognized leader for global study, social justice, and hands-on learning. This transformation did not happen by accident. Instead, it was built step by step through vision, major financial gifts, dedicated faculty, and a belief that education should help fix real-world problems.

Macalester's focus on the world began right after World War II under President Charles Turck. He believed that college should prepare students to build world peace and understand different cultures. In October 1950, Macalester became the first college in Minnesota to fly the United Nations flag on campus every day next to the American flag. This was a clear message that the school was committed to global teamwork.

During the 1950s and 1960s, Macalester started bringing in students from around the world by offering them financial aid. These international students did not just learn on campus; they also traveled around the Midwest to talk with local communities about world issues. One famous student from this era was Kofi Annan, who came from Ghana in 1959. He credits his time at Macalester with teaching him how to listen and work across cultures. Annan later became the Secretary-General of the United Nations and won the Nobel Peace Prize.

While the college had a strong global reputation, it faced serious money problems in the 1970s. That changed because of DeWitt Wallace, the co-founder of Reader's Digest magazine. When he passed away, he left a massive amount of company stock to the college. When those shares were sold in 1990, Macalester's savings account jumped from \$60 million to over \$300 million almost overnight.

This sudden wealth changed everything. Macalester could build new facilities, hire top professors, and keep class sizes small. Most importantly, it gave the college the money to offer strong financial aid to students from all over the world, not just wealthy families.

However, during the 1990s, students and professors pointed out a big problem: the college was focused on global issues, but it was ignoring civil rights and inequality inside the United States. They argued that Macalester needed to care just as much about local communities and domestic racism as it did about foreign policy. Three key history professors led the push to make domestic diversity a core part of the college.

Mahmoud El-Kati taught African American history and insisted that Macalester build real, lasting relationships with Black communities in Saint Paul. He showed students that real learning happens outside classroom walls and that academic work must connect to local struggles for equity.

James Brewer Stewart, an expert on the history of American slavery and abolition, pushed the administration to require anti-racism courses for all undergraduates. His work ensured every student graduated with a firm understanding of civil rights history and structural inequality.

Peter Rachleff taught labor and immigration history, showing how workers from diverse racial and cultural backgrounds could join together to fight for better working conditions. He connected classroom theory directly to local union organizing and immigrant rights movements.

Starting in the late 1990s, another generation of leaders took these social justice ideas even further across campus.

Duchess Harris helped create the American Studies department, giving students a dedicated academic home to research how race, gender, and legal systems shape American society. Her leadership helped anchor intersectional scholarship in the college curriculum.

William Hart brought a rigorous focus on ethics and philosophy to the Religious Studies department. He challenged students to think deeply about fairness, moral responsibility, and human rights within a global context.

Brian Lozenski focused his work on educational justice, partnering directly with local youth and community organizers. His research helped lead the movement to bring Ethnic Studies programs to public school classrooms across Minnesota.

Sedric McClure helped guide the college's Community Engagement Center, organizing programs where students worked directly with Twin Cities organizations on housing, civil rights, and urban equity. He built reciprocal partnerships between the campus and local neighborhoods.

Hana Dinku led the Lealtad-Suzuki Center for Social Justice, creating supportive spaces and leadership opportunities for first-generation students and students of color. Her work ensured that equity remained an active, everyday practice in student life.

After 2005, Macalester made sure these core values were not just taught in humanities classes, but also in science, math, and technology.

In the Math and Computer Science departments, students began using data science to study issues like healthcare access and pollution patterns in cities. In Biology and Chemistry, the college created programs focused on Community and Global Health, teaching pre-med students to look at how poverty affects human health. In Environmental Studies and Economics, students learned to combine business tools with climate justice.

By 2025, all of these ideas came together at the Kofi Annan Institute for Global Citizenship on campus. Today, Macalester students regularly visit the United Nations in New York, intern with local Twin Cities nonprofits, and conduct advanced research in science and math labs.

Over seventy-five years, Macalester proved that a college does not have to choose between high academic standards, global awareness, and local social justice. By bringing all three together, it built an environment where students learn how to make a real difference in the world.