

Cultivating Alumni Engagement in Undergraduate Leadership Education: The Villanova University Student Leadership Forum

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Introduction & Issue Statement

As Villanova University embarked on a new strategic plan in 2009, the Division of Student Life placed a renewed emphasis on co-curricular leadership education (Gigliotti, 2014, in press). This Application Brief will highlight one of the new student leadership initiatives, the Student Leadership Forum in Washington, DC. Referred throughout the paper as the Forum, this initiative provides an opportunity to engage students in an elevated level of conversation related to the intersection of leadership, ethics, and integrity within the context of our Nation's Capital. The program encourages students to explore the connections between the University's mission and their experiences as student leaders. Finally, by cultivating connections with alumni in the Washington, DC area, the Forum offers a model for alumni engagement in undergraduate leadership education.

Related Literature

Understood to be a critical outcome for college and university students (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2009), leadership education has advanced from an atheoretical and loosely structured set of activities to one that is both informed by theory and organized around curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular outcomes. A diverse array of co-curricular undergraduate leadership programs continue to emerge across colleges and universities (Dugan et al., 2011; Komives, et al., 2011). These leadership initiatives address various student audiences, advance a number of approaches to student leadership development, and reflect the unique characteristics, goals, and values of the host institution. For the purpose of this current essay, leadership is understood to be a process of social influence that is enacted and accomplished through communication (Fairhurst, 2007; Fairhurst, & Connaughton, 2014; Hackman & Johnson, 2013; Northouse, 2013; Ruben, 2006; Witherspoon, 1997). The Villanova University Leadership Forum is one example of a co-curricular leadership program for undergraduate students which provides a space for students to critically explore the process of leadership, while learning from the leadership decisions and experiences of a number of alumni in the Washington, DC area.

Current research explores alumni giving and participation (Gaier, 2005) and organizational identification on behalf of alumni (Mael & Ashforth, 2006), however, the extant literature does not explicitly address alumni engagement in undergraduate leadership programming. Involvement at the undergraduate level and the quality of the undergraduate experience influence alumni engagement (Weerts & Ronca, 2008) and alumni participation in the community (Johnson, 2004). Furthermore, the current literature points to the post-graduation impact of student leadership involvement. For example, in their qualitative of student alumni programs, Bialek and Lloyd (1998) suggest that these undergraduate leadership experiences “serve as fertile ground to ‘grow’ active and contributing alumni” (p. 6). As noted in this current application brief, not only do students develop from these undergraduate leadership experiences, but alumni engagement in leadership programs may also advance the goals of the alumni affairs office.

Villanova University Student Leadership Forum

Villanova University, located in the suburbs of Philadelphia, PA, is a Catholic institution founded by the Order of St. Augustine. The values and charism of the Augustinian order permeate the institution, including a tripartite emphasis on Veritas (Truth), Unitas (Unity), and Caritas (Love). As expressed in Villanova University’s mission statement,

[t]he University community welcomes and respects members of all faiths who seek to nurture a concern for the common good and who share an enthusiasm for the challenge of responsible and productive citizenship in order to build a just and peaceful world (Villanova University, 2014, paragraph 2).

The Student Leadership Forum, in addition to our other co-curricular student leadership development initiatives, aligns with the goals, values, and purpose of Villanova University. This emphasis on mission alignment allows students to connect their leadership experiences with the larger purpose of the institution (Dwyer, Gigliotti, & Lee, 2014). The curriculum for the Forum integrates the principles of the University mission with a broader discussion of leadership, ethics, and integrity. Students are encouraged to reflect on their distinctive leadership experiences at Villanova, while learning about the leadership journeys of alumni from the institution. Alumni participants, in particular, are encouraged to consider the ways in which their involvement at Villanova prepared them for their current professional roles in Washington, DC.

As I suggest in a recent article (2014) in the *Journal of Student Affairs Research & Practice*, three streams of influence converged to create a “window” for a new Office of Leadership Programs at Villanova University. These three streams include a community-wide need, institutional support, and student interest. The Student Leadership Forum is an outcome of these three influential streams. First, there was a need in the community to integrate leadership education with other institutional goals, including career services, professional development, and alumni engagement. Next, a diverse array of members of the community joined the committee to develop the Student Leadership Forum. Both human and financial support on behalf of the institution was critical to the success of this program. Finally, a number of students expressed an interest in participating in a program that would connect them with alumni in the Washington, DC area. As I argue in the essay, student interest and participation in leadership education

initiatives both contributed to the “window of opportunity” for additional co-curricular leadership programs and continue to add legitimacy to the work of the office.

Ethics and integrity occupy an important role in the undergraduate experience at Villanova University. Through a combination of various theoretical perspectives, including leadership for social change (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996), servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1970; Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1998), and authentic leadership (George, 2003; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), students are taught to pursue an other-oriented approach to leadership. Leaders have an obligation and commitment to improve the lives of those whom they serve. This emphasis on positive social change aligns directly with the mission and core values of the institution. In collaboration with a number of offices from across campus, including the Office of Student Development, the President’s Office, the Office of University Advancement, the Office of Alumni Relations, the Office of Residence Life, and the Career Center, the Student Leadership Forum was implemented in the Spring 2014 to address the rich connections between leadership, ethics, and integrity.

The Student Leadership Forum was open to students from all years and all academic majors. The planning committee set a loose target of 30-50 undergraduate students. We promoted the event by directly contacting students with an interest in moving to Washington, DC following graduation, students who participated in prior co-curricular leadership initiatives, and students in positions of leadership from across the university. In addition, by promoting the event to academic advisors from all four colleges, advisors would be able to identify students who might be interested in a program such as the Leadership Forum. Nearly 60 students registered online for this inaugural program during our two-month registration period. Students were asked to make a deposit of \$50 to reserve their spot for the program; however, we made accommodations for students with any financial hardships. The funding for this program came directly from our programming budget in the Office of Student Development.

The learning outcomes for the Student Leadership Forum provided a guide for curriculum development. The following learning outcomes for the program participants privilege both student learning and mission alignment. As a result of their participation in the program, students would be able to:

- Identify the importance of ethics and integrity in leadership.
- Interact with other aspiring and current student leaders and alumni in Washington, DC.
- Think critically about issues of ethics and integrity through the use of leadership case studies.
- Create a plan for integrating ethics and integrity into their student clubs and organizations.
- Articulate the mission of Villanova University as they grow as student leaders.
- Reflect on their personal leadership journey at Villanova and beyond.

We designed the schedule with the interests of both the students and alumni participants in mind. The two-day initiative was both rigorous and accelerated. Ten staff volunteers from the planning committee and 55 student participants departed campus at 7:00 am by charter bus on Friday morning. In order to take advantage of the travel time to the DC area, students watched movies with an emphasis on leadership during the trip. An alumna invited us to spend the first

day of the Student Leadership Forum on Capitol Hill. We invited a diverse and bi-partisan collection of alumni from various political staffs, lobbying/trade associations, and public policy organizations to speak to our students throughout the day in one of the Capitol Hill conference rooms. The prompt for these alumni conversations was intentionally broad - to discuss how their leadership experience(s) as a student at Villanova prepared them for their influential leadership roles in Washington, DC and to provide any relevant examples that speak to the negotiation of ethics and integrity as leaders. Additional highlights from this first day include a VIP Tour of the Capital, a keynote leadership lecture and dinner at an off-site restaurant, and a “Twilight Tour” of the DC area. It is worth noting the dual intellectual and social/emotional goals of the program. Students could learn more about leadership theory and practice as a result of participating in the experiential program, but they could also cultivate connections with other students, staff and alumni.

Villanova University, in addition to a number of colleges and universities across the country, have a partnership with The Washington Center, a non-profit organization that “provides selected students challenging opportunities to work and learn in Washington, D.C. for academic credit” (The Washington Center, 2014, About Us). On the second day of the Forum, staff volunteers led a number of sessions and small group conversations at The Washington Center headquarters office. The curriculum for the second day of the workshop allowed for a deeper exploration of personal ethics and integrity. Recent graduates from all four academic colleges were invited to speak to the student participants during a young alumni panel and networking lunch. In addition to introducing various concepts related to leadership ethics, students were encouraged to connect the themes of the Forum to their own student leadership experiences at Villanova. Prior to departing for campus, students received a signed certificate of completion and completed the program evaluations. Reflecting on their major takeaways from the weekend, I was most impressed by their constructive comments and rich feedback.

By all metrics, the Student Leadership Forum was a success. Based on the program evaluations, all 55 student participants indicated that they would recommend the Student Leadership Forum to other students. The qualitative data speaks to the impact of this collaborative leadership initiative:

- *“I was reminded how much I love Villanova and how blessed I am to be a part of such a passionate, connected and supportive community.”*
- *“I learned so much about myself, my fellow peers, Villanova alumni, and about leadership and ethics in the context of D.C. and at Villanova. It was one of the most valuable and memorable experiences I have had at Villanova.”*
- *“I learned how connected leadership and ethics are in all aspects of life. Discovering what your values are and never compromising those values are at the core of living with integrity and being an influential leader.”*

In addition to the favorable student sentiment, the alumni also offered similar reactions at the conclusion of the Forum. The alumni commented on their positive experience with the program and as one alumna noted, *“I more than enjoyed spending time with some of Villanova's future leaders...[during] what seemed to be an inspirational weekend.”* Several of the alumni have expressed interest in participating in any future leadership programming in the DC area. If provided a venue for engagement, alumni can play an active and influential role in undergraduate

leadership education. Their involvement in undergraduate leadership initiatives has the potential to advance both student learning *and* alumni engagement. Above all, students, alumni, and staff involved in the experiential leadership program advance the mission of the institution by intentionally integrating the values of the institution with a broader discussion of leadership, ethics, and integrity. A central quality of the Villanova experience, “community,” is co-constructed through these brief, yet meaningful interpersonal encounters.

Reflections & Recommendations

As this essay suggests, the Student Leadership Forum engages multiple stakeholders and advances the goals of a number of departments across campus. This collaborative program reflects the culture of the university. Leadership educators that seek to replicate this program should actively align the learning outcomes of their co-curricular alumni program with the unique mission of their institution. Based on the success of this initiative, we look forward to potentially expanding the Forum into different cities in collaboration with other interested alumni chapters. Furthermore, we may explore a number of funding options to keep the program sustainable for the office and affordable for the student participants. Finally, with the direct support of our Career Center, the planned Forum for Spring 2015 will actively target students with an interest in moving to the DC area following graduation.

At a meta-level, the collaboration between inter-departmental staff and alumni, along with the unintentional and unpredictable issues that arise from event planning (e.g. a late arrival by the catering company for lunch and the missing bus at the end of the program), provide real-time opportunities for student learning. These experiences, both planned and unplanned, help students learn about leadership content and the processes of collaboration, coordination, and event planning. Student affairs practitioners should take advantage of both the planned and unplanned opportunities for learning during these co-curricular experiences.

Finally, as the details of this program suggest, the Student Leadership Forum intentionally engages a diverse group of university stakeholders in a broader conversation about student leadership education. Leadership education merits university-wide attention. In particular, this application brief highlights the importance of fusing leadership education in ongoing campus-wide discussions related to career services, professional development, and alumni engagement. Consistent with the claims of Connaughton, Lawrence, and Ruben (2003), “colleges and universities have a fundamental responsibility to guide the development of the next generation of capable and ethical leaders and that these institutions must do so through a highly focused, multidisciplinary approach” (p. 46). Leadership learning occurs at the intersections of disciplines, departments, and divisions.

On a personal note, many questioned our approach of traveling to Washington, DC to discuss the intersection of ethics and integrity. Some found this vision to be paradoxical, especially given the ongoing state of debate and discontent in our Nation’s Capital. I recall one pundit describing the current state of affairs in Washington, DC as “too many people talking *past* one another and not enough talking *to* one another.” I would argue that it is the imperative of leadership educators to challenge the status quo. If leadership educators are unwilling to demand a more optimistic, collaborative, visionary, and transformative approach to leadership, one where leaders have the trust of their followers to enact positive societal change, who will? The future of

our institutions depends upon it. It is my hope that this application brief will be of interest to scholars, practitioners, *and* alumni who have an interest in advancing college student leadership.

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