

Cultivating Visionary Leaders to Transform Our World

Natalie J. Coers

Academic Programs Coordinator
College of Agricultural & Life Sciences
University of Florida

Abstract

Vision has long been a quality and characteristic defining leadership. To cultivate vision among undergraduate students in a course, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals are utilized as a foundation to inspire a vision that connects local service and personal interests to global, complex issues. Students select a goal to work with for various projects throughout their courses in a program, culminating with the selection of a goal to build a vision around for future contribution as leaders in our world. Student feedback indicated a positive impact of the SDGs on the awareness of global issues and the active role each can play at the local level for progress to continue moving forward.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals provide an excellent exemplar for international collaboration toward leading global change through inclusive strategies and coalition building. In September 2000, the United Nations Millennium Declaration outlined fundamental values for international relations and a resolve to address issues of peace, security and disarmament, development and poverty education, protection of our common environment, human rights, democracy and good governance, and others to strengthen the ties within the United Nations. The subsequent Millennium Campaign – also known as the Millennium Development Goals – identified eight specific goals for global leaders to attain by 2015, including: End Hunger, Universal Education, Gender Equity, Child Health, Maternal Health, Combat HIV/AIDS, Environmental Sustainability, and promoting Global Partnership. Each of these broad areas included specific targets to be reached by 2015; though significant progress has been made through the MDGs, focus must remain on fighting hunger and poverty to establish global food security for the world's poorest (Feed the Future, 2014; FAO, IFAD, and WFP, 2015). The post-2015 agenda process reassessed what global needs should take priority on the international leadership stage through an inclusive process that included a social media campaign and several multi-level stakeholder meetings. The Sustainable Development Goals were approved in September 2015, with the official campaign launch in January 2016. Seventeen goals now set forth an ambitious agenda for our world leaders, including the areas of poverty alleviation, zero hunger, clean water and sanitation, climate action, responsible consumption and production, quality education, etc. For lasting change to occur, more developmental efforts will be needed – beyond relief and rehabilitation – and may require collaboration across various organizations with similar purposes (Corbett and Fikkert, 2012). To achieve such ambitious goals, local understanding and action are needed through engagement in education.

Background

Over the past 20 years, the internationalization of curricula within agriculture and leadership development disciplines, as well as the overall higher education student experience, has continued to develop in both popularity and research efforts (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Moore, Williams, Boyd, & Elbert, 2011). Deardorff (2011) describes internationalization in postsecondary education as efforts both through the curriculum and through co-curricular activities that bring intercultural elements to a student's college experience. A key outcome of internationalization activities in institutions of higher education is the development of intercultural competence in participating students, defined as "effective and appropriate communication and behavior in an intercultural situation" (Deardorff, 2006, p. 66). Numerous youth and collegiate leadership programs utilize the Social Change Model (Komives, Wagner, & Associates, 2009; Wagner, Ostick, & Komives, 2009) as a foundation for student development with its presented individual, group, and societal/community values perspectives framing the seven "C" elements of the model: consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship. These elements are integrated into a reciprocal model to facilitate change. The National Leadership Education Research Agenda Priority Area VII "encompasses a focused charge for the development of global and intercultural competence and increased understanding of leadership in a global context" (Andenoro, et al., 2013, p. 25). The agenda also connects Priority VII to Priority VI (Social Change & Community Development), noting that "intercultural leadership promotes and advances social change in international contexts, with respect to systems-based and complexity-based leadership frameworks" (Andenoro, et al., 2013, p. 25). A deep understanding of creating positive change is a needed attribute to develop in learners to facilitate the forward progress of the global agenda set forth in the Sustainable Development Goals.

Description

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are introduced to students through a classroom lecture within the first few weeks of the semester. This lesson provides the background regarding the formation of the SDGs, an overview of the structure of the goals and their respective progress, targets, and indicators. Students are encouraged to identify with one or more of the goals as it pertains to their personal and/or professional interests. Students then utilize one of the SDGs as a connection point for selecting an individual organization to serve within for the duration of the semester(s) to reach a minimum of 25 hours. The SDGs are interspersed throughout additional curriculum items, culminating in a global vision assignment. This assignment challenges students to critically think about their selected SDG and determine a vision for a project, initiative, or organization they would like to pursue in the future if their personal financial state were not a factor. They must indicate the endeavor's meaningfulness, timeline for implementation, key stakeholders, and impact on the identified SDG and community. The concept is then presented in a fashion similar to a pitch for investors to grasp their concept and plan. An initial inquiry through a programmatic portfolio question provided feedback to the impact of including the Sustainable Development Goals as part of the curriculum. Seven of ten students submitting portfolios in Spring 2016 answered the SDG prompt as a part of their reflection; their feedback is discussed below.

Current Results

Initial results from a group of students indicated a positive impact on student awareness of global issues and understanding of potential actions toward progress of the global goals. Regarding awareness of global issues, one student shared, “Prior to my inclusion in this program I had not heard of the Millennium Development Goals, and it was incredibly exciting to learn more about what global leaders are doing to address some of the most complex problems our world is facing” (Student 3). Another student stated:

“I thoroughly enjoyed learning more about the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals. I was unaware that either existed before this program and it brings facts and figures in a simple demographic that everyone can understand to really see what needs to be done.” (Student 4)

Additionally, a student connected this new awareness to their future career path:

“The Millennium Development Goals helped to broaden my understanding of global issues. It is too easy to narrow your worldview to only your life and the things that directly impact you. Even your career narrows your worldview. As a future veterinarian, I used to only concern myself with animal-related issues, however there are so many more issues in the world, and they are all connected. We don’t get to pick and choose that the global issues are or are not. The Millennium Development Goals also helped to categorize overwhelming issues in a way that are easier to grasp and for someone like myself who doesn’t have a strong background in humanitarian issues.” (Student 6)

The inclusion of the SDGs within the curriculum helped these students gain a deeper awareness of global issues, as well as make connections to individual interests.

Increased awareness brought a further connection to the potential actions each could take to contribute toward the advancement of the global goals while motivating students making a positive impact in a local community. One student shared:

“The focus on the Millennium and Sustainable Development Goals re-opened my eyes to global issues. My high school geography and history classes focused a lot on world problems, but my classes in college have mostly been specifically related only to course content. The MDGs and SDGs have helped me remember that there is a whole world outside of college, and that it’s possible for us as leaders to make a difference in the world. We all have diverse interests and skills, and I think with the right amount of motivation and planning, all of us in the program are capable of doing something that’s going to help the progress of several of these goals.” (Student 2)

Another student gained the perspective of small actions contributing to the larger goals:

“The Millennium Development Goals really illustrated the scope of problems that our world faces. While you hear about global issues such as world hunger and

climate change as pressing issues, you do not realize the severity of the problems until you are given numbers. It was also interesting because it is easy to get caught up in your field of interest, so there are many MDGs that I never thought of as being such a huge world problem as they just weren't in my frame of reference. The MDGs proved to be very eye opening. In a different light, it is endearing to see the world coming together to try and solve such devastating global issues. The MDGs were very humbling and by incorporating these goals into multiple assignments it really demonstrated to us how every little bit, even if it is not directly related to the exact goal helps achieve them." (Student 5)

Additionally, Student 1 shared, "These issues may just take different forms but the root issue is the same, we all could improve in many ways." The connection to action and leadership education was driven home by another student, who shared:

"The inclusion of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) brought reality into the picture. It made me realize why I was working to become a leader in the first place. The awareness of MDGs is almost like an elephant being in the room sometimes because it seems like we have all the resources and manpower to solve some of these problems but people are not working together or sharing ideas to try to solve these problems. It makes learning about leadership even more important to me." (Student 7)

Action toward the accomplishment of the global goals requires leaders who are both aware and engaged in the broader impact of issues facing our world.

Conclusions/Recommendations

A brief qualitative review of the initial comments regarding the inclusion of the Sustainable Development Goals provided encouragement for the instructor to pursue additional research inquiries. Future research will address the various aspects of the SDG lesson, knowledge gained through the creative process, and integration of the SDGs into the programmatic curriculum. This future research could offer leadership educators a key resource to promoting critical and creative thinking around global issues, as well as help students connect local actions to global initiatives toward a deeper understanding of their role in making a difference within a complex world.

References

- Altbach, P.G. & Knight, J. (2007). The internationalization of higher education: Motivations and realities. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3/4), 290-305.
- Andenoro, A. C., Allen, S. J., Haber-Curran, P., Jenkins, D. M., Sowcik, M., Dugan, J. P., & Osteen, L. (2013). National Leadership Education research agenda 2013-2018: Providing strategic direction for the field of leadership education. Retrieved from Association of Leadership Educators website: <http://leadershipeducators.org/ResearchAgenda>.
- Corbett, S., & Fikkert, B. (2012). When helping hurts: How to alleviate poverty without hurting the poor...and yourself. Chicago: Moody Publishers.
- Deardorff, D. K. (2006). Identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalization. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 10, 241-266.
- Deardorff, D.K. (2011). Assessing intercultural competence. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 149, 65-79. doi: 10.1002/ir.381
- Feed the Future. (2014). Feed the Future progress report: Accelerating progress to end global hunger. www.feedthefuture.gov.
- Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development, and World Food Programme. (2015). The State of Food Insecurity in the World. Meeting the 2015 international hunger targets: taking stock of uneven progress. Rome: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.
- Komives, S.R. & Wagner, W., & Associates. (2009). Leadership for a better world. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Moore, L.L., Williams, J., Boyd, B.L., & Elbert, C.D. (2011). International experiences of agricultural leadership and development seniors. *International Journal of Business Management and Economic Research*, 2(1), 117-123.
- Wagner, W., Ostick, D. T. & Komives, S. R. (2009). Leadership for a better world: Understanding the social change model of leadership development (Instructor's Manual). Online: National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs. Accessed from <https://nclp.umd.edu/publications/Default.aspx>.

Author Biography

Natalie J. Coers is a Program Coordinator for the College of Agricultural & Life Sciences (CALS) at the University of Florida. She teaches leadership courses connected to the CALS Leadership Institute, and facilitates faculty development initiatives. Her research interests

include programmatic leadership development, leadership development self-efficacy, and international experiences.

ncoers@ufl.edu