

## **The Hunger Project: Exercising Civic Leadership *with* the Community *for* the Common Good in an Introductory Leadership Course**

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### **Abstract**

Contemporary trends in leadership education emphasize paradigms of learning and educational practices associated with developing responsible citizens, furthering higher education's civic mission. Yet, few introductory leadership courses include an explicit civic component (Johnson & Woodard, 2014). Service-learning is a high-impact practice designed to link the classroom and community in meaningful ways (Kuh, 2008). This application brief illustrates how Kansas State University faculty, students, and community partners engaged in a semester-long service-learning experience for the purpose of exercising leadership to make progress on the social issue of food insecurity. We describe how service-learning can be a catalyst to explore and engage the learning nexus of social challenges, leadership, and civic engagement in an introductory leadership course.

## Introduction

*“Educational leaders have come to realize that the critical issues facing our nation can be solved only through the creation of educated citizens”* (Cress, 2005 p. 12).

Universities and colleges exist for multiple purposes, blending preparation for career success and citizenship in a global context. For many educational leaders, the civic mission of higher education (i.e., engaged citizenship, civic engagement, personal and social responsibility) has become an imperative (AAC&U, 2007; Campus Compact, 1998; Levine & Dean, 2012). Given many leadership programs’ emphasis on relational, socially responsible, adaptive leadership (Heifetz & Linsky, 2009; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2013; Komives, Wagner & Associates, 2009), we believe such programs have the potential to lead the way in fulfilling the civic purposes of education. However, Johnson and Woodard’s (2014) review of introductory leadership curricula identified a need to strengthen the intersections between leadership education and civic engagement. Of the 77 leadership course syllabi they studied, only about one quarter of them included a civic component (Johnson & Woodard, 2014). Although service-learning has been documented as a source of learning used in student leadership development (Allen & Hartman, 2009), Jenkins (2012) reported that out of a sample of 303 leadership educators, only 11.2% ( $n = 34$ ) identified service-learning as one of their “top three” most used instructional strategies (p. 13).

This application brief outlines the integration of a semester-long service-learning experience into an introductory leadership course; moreover, it describes how Kansas State University faculty, students, and community partners exercised leadership to make progress on the social issue of food insecurity. “The Hunger Project” illustrates how service-learning can be a catalyst to explore and engage the learning nexus of social challenges, leadership, and civic engagement.

## Review of Related Scholarship

### Civic Leadership and Social Change

The purpose and structure of contemporary leadership education programs have been influenced strongly by the belief that our society needs more and better leaders, that leadership can be taught (and learned), and that the college environment is a strategic setting for leadership development (Astin & Astin, 2000; Rost & Barker, 2000; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 2000). The widely emphasized Social Change Model of Leadership (HERI, 1996; Komives & Wagner, 2009) frames socially responsible leaders as individuals who are motivated to exercise leadership for the purpose of creating change on behalf of others and for the benefit of society as a whole. Within this framework, leadership cannot be separated from civic purposes. Crislip and O’Malley (2013) define civic leadership as leadership “for the common good” (p. 1). They suggest we all share in both the problems and opportunities of civic life; therefore, we all have a responsibility to mobilize and energize others to make progress on civic challenges (Crislip & O’Malley, 2013). Based on this literature, we consider leadership for social change to be both the process and product of civic engagement.

## Service-Learning: A Pedagogy for Civic Leadership Development

One assumption of the Social Change Model (SCM) is that service is a powerful vehicle for leadership development (HERI, 1996; Komives et al., 2009). Results of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership indicate that community service experiences are a strong predictor of students' capacity for socially responsible leadership (Dugan, 2006; Dugan, Kodama, Correia & Associates, 2013). Dugan (2006) suggests that higher education faculty and staff would benefit from strategically thinking about the linkages between leadership and service programming. Designing an introductory leadership course around the high impact practice of service-learning (Kuh, 2008) provides such a link.

Service-learning is the intentional integration of academic learning (in this case, the study of leadership) and relevant community service (Howard, 1998). The opportunity for real-world application combined with reflection on experience that is the key element of this high-impact educational practice (Kuh, 2008). According to Ash and Clayton (2009), there are three primary learning goals that drive instructional design of both the service experience and critical reflection process: academic enhancement, personal growth, and civic learning (p. 29).

Saltmarsch, Hartley, and Clayton (2009) distinguish between traditional and democratic approaches to civic engagement. The traditional approach reflects an activity, or engagement in service *for* the benefit of a community partner. A democratic framework also considers processes and purpose. The community partner co-creates the learning process; thus, service is not just *for*, but *with*, the partner (Saltmarsch et al., 2009). Applied to an introductory leadership course, this approach creates powerful learning opportunities as students engage with and reflect on not only what their leadership *is for*, but who they are exercising leadership *with*. The democratic components of purpose and process closely connect with the assumptions and values of socially responsible leadership (HERI, 1996).

The impact of service-learning and community engagement on undergraduate learning and leadership development has been documented through examples of practice and empirical research. For example, Seemiller (2006) described how building an introductory course around a service project “challenges students to recognize the role of leadership in creating social change, giving students a context within which they can apply leadership concepts learned” (p. 41). Sessa, Matos, and Hopkins (2009) used qualitative analysis of reflection narratives about service-learning experiences to explore the connections between knowledge and practice. Their study found that service experiences enhanced students' leadership learning by providing the context for real life application. They concluded that service-learning is an effective pedagogy that gives students “an opportunity to develop leadership qualities ... both theoretically and contextually” (2009, p. 188). Given that experience is essential to leader development (Day, Harrison, & Halpin, 2009), service-learning pedagogy is well-suited for developing civic-minded, socially responsible leaders.

### Why Hunger?

The eradication of hunger is a global priority (United Nations, n. d.). Hunger and food insecurity have become inescapable social realities in America (Holben, 2010), particularly

given the increase in poverty (Edelman, 2012) and decreases in government spending to address them (Somers & Block, 2005). In 2012, 14.5 percent of American households were food insecure (Coleman-Jensen, Nord, & Singh, 2013). According to the *Feeding America* website (n. d. a), over 50 million Americans, including more than one in five children, experience hunger. In the county in which Kansas State University is situated, 18.4% of the population is food insecure (Feeding America, n. d. b). The Hunger Project described in this paper demonstrates a strategic, experiential approach to understanding how progress could be made on this civic challenge, while at the same time furthering students' development as socially responsible leaders.

## Description of the Practice

For over 10 years, the School of Leadership Studies at Kansas State University has partnered with the Flint Hills Breadbasket, a community-based food assistance program, to assist in efforts to reduce hunger in the community. An annual food collection called "Cats for Cans", the predecessor to the project outlined here, was facilitated as a community service project through the Introduction to Leadership Concepts course. In Fall 2013, our faculty team believed that we could enhance the learning and leadership development potential by integrating the high impact practice of service-learning into the existing course structure. We looked to several key frameworks, including the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (HERI, 1996), Ash and Clayton's (2004; 2009) DEAL model of critical reflection (**D**escribe, **E**valuate, and **A**rticulate **L**earning), and the PARE service-learning model, which includes **P**reparation, **A**ction, **R**eflection, and **E**valuation (UMD, 1999). The overarching purpose of the Hunger Project was to prompt students to engage deeply with leadership concepts while exercising leadership through service, and explore their personal answer to the question, "Leadership for what?"

Over the 2013-2014 academic year, the Hunger Project mobilized over 1,100 students (most being first-year students), 65 class leaders (peer educators), six faculty instructors, and multiple community partners in an on-going community partnership with the Flint Hills Breadbasket. Introduction to Leadership is a one semester, two credit-hour course facilitated in two parts: lecture sections of approximately 100-120 students each meet once per week for 50 minutes, followed immediately by learning communities (small group sections of 12-14 students) for an additional 50 minutes. This project was facilitated over seven weeks of the course, and much of the work occurred at the learning community level.

The PARE model of service-learning (UMD, 1999) provided a framework and context to help students understand and apply leadership to the issue of hunger. For each phase of the process, students received an assignment "guide" with direction and reflection prompts.

### Preparation

In the preparation phase, students explored critical questions about the local impact of hunger and food insecurity. First, students watched *A Place at the Table* (Jacobson & Silverbush, 2013), a documentary highlighting stories of hunger in America. Students then researched hunger statistics for their own hometowns or counties, and discussed potential root causes of food insecurity. An important preparation step was to learn more about our partner, the Flint Hills Breadbasket. Students had the option to watch an orientation video or tour the Breadbasket

facility. After reviewing their research and the project guidelines, groups set academic, personal, and civic learning goals and developed an initial action plan/task list. Each group also completed a team analysis to assist in communication and role delegation.

## **Action**

The action phase of this project varied by semester, in response to situational factors and seasonal needs of the Flint Hills Breadbasket. Due to the large number of people involved in this project, we provided an outline of basic action steps and guidelines to the students. This outline was created collaboratively with our partners, class leaders, and former students. Each learning community was invited to “make the project their own,” which allowed for some flexibility and creativity in how the project was executed.

**Fall semester.** Approximately 900 students were enrolled in eight fall sections of Introduction to Leadership. The Cats for Cans food collection had been used as a service activity within the fall course for over 10 years, thus the direct action steps were well established. First, each learning community was assigned a neighborhood for food collection. Thanks to a partnership with the City of Manhattan, Kansas, students could access an interactive on-line map of homes and businesses within each neighborhood. Groups created personalized flyers and attached them to grocery bags donated by local partner stores. The flyers included information about the project, local hunger statistics, and the procedure (citizens were asked to fill the bag and leave it on their doorstep for pickup at a later date). Students dropped off the labeled bags at each home in their neighborhood, then returned to collect the filled bags. Finally, students delivered the food to the Flint Hills Breadbasket where they weighed and sorted the items. Some students assisted in packing boxes (called “baskets”) of food, and distributed the baskets to the Breadbasket’s clients in celebration of the winter holiday season.

**Spring semester.** Based on the momentum and energy created by the fall project, stakeholders and faculty agreed that the community would benefit from a spring food basket distribution (around the Easter holiday). In this iteration of the project, the students (approximately 200 students, freshman through senior level, in two course sections) were responsible for every step of the spring basket process. To complete the action phase of the project, students were required to participate in at least two direct service opportunities, which included: helping with client sign-ups, a food collection day outside of three local grocery stores, sorting donated food, assembling the baskets, and distributing baskets both on-site and through at-home delivery for elderly patrons. Rather than work as separate learning communities, students collaborated across the two course sections. This required a great deal of communication, including the use of shared online documents.

## **Reflection**

During this phase, students completed an individual reflection on the experience, then engaged in a group debriefing conversation guided by the class leader. The discussion followed Ash and Clayton’s DEAL Model (2004, 2009) as a way for students to a) **D**escribe their experience, b) **E**xamine their experience through lens of personal growth, academic content, and civic responsibility, and c) **A**rticulate their **L**earning. For example, one class leader asked her

students to draw a picture of each service activity they attended. She then lined up the illustrations in a timeline across the wall, and used the timeline as the basis for group reflection. Common themes of learning during the group discussion were captured to assist the learning communities in developing a group presentation for the evaluation phase of the project.

## Evaluation

The evaluation component was an opportunity for each learning community sections to articulate their learning in a form that was both professional and authentic to their group. Forms included posters, portfolios, PowerPoint presentations, and videos. The groups engaged with the following questions as during a presentation meeting with their lead instructor: a) What did we learn from the Hunger Project?; b) How did we learn it?; c) Why does it (the learning) matter?; d) What will I (as individual members of group) do as a result of the Hunger Project?; e) What will we (the entire group) do as a result of the Hunger Project? These questions were adapted from Ash and Clayton's (2009) recommendations for "articulation of learning" based on Bloom's Taxonomy (p. 43). Each presentation lasted 10-15 minutes, followed by a conversation with the instructor for an additional 10-15 minutes. During the conversation, the instructor asked follow-up questions to clarify and provide deeper meaning of the experience.

## Discussion of Outcomes

The Hunger Project was designed to engage and enhance students' academic, personal, and civic learning (Ash and Clayton, 2004). While traditional assessment data in the form of evaluation scores showed that groups met the assignment requirements, we were more interested in understanding the "meaning" of what and how students learned. Assessment of this project is continually evolving; however, we used informal data collected through faculty and class leader observations of the learning process, the evaluation presentations, and the group's final "products" (learning artifacts) to make interpretations of student learning outcomes.

Students shared their *academic learning* as they made connections between their experience and leadership concepts covered in the course. Most notably, their examples and application referenced the topics of personal and team strengths, servant leadership, inclusion, ethical leadership, conflict, and transactional/transformational leadership.

A common theme of *personal development* that emerged in students' reflection was related to their ability to work in a group. They especially noted how time management was a challenge, and how difficult it can be to mobilize a group of very busy people to accomplish a goal. Interestingly, some of the strongest personal development came from moments of "failure;" that is, when individuals or teams failed to meet expectations or experienced challenges in the process (e.g., people not "showing up," lack of commitment or passion for the project, frustration with the structure or lack of structure, or the tendency to default to the authority for direction). The use of powerful questions helped students recognize their own role and responsibility in exercising leadership as part of a group and for a cause.

From a *civic perspective*, the most tangible outcome was the food collection itself. In the fall semester, students collected 15,978 pounds of food, as well as \$1,498.28 in financial

donations. This food was used to create holiday food packages for 300 families, in addition to supporting regular food pantry patrons. In the spring semester, students collected 4,000 pounds of food and \$1,655.58, and distributed 75 baskets to clients at the Flint Hills Breadbasket.

However, exercising civic leadership is more than an activity; it is motivated by a connection to, and responsibility for, society's challenges and opportunities (Crislip & O'Malley, 2013). During our observation of evaluation presentations, we heard multiple groups describe how their awareness of food insecurity and hunger increased through this experience; for many students it was eye-opening to consider the dire circumstances facing the country, their neighbors, and even their own classmates. Some students expressed that they were motivated to stay involved with the Flint Hills Breadbasket, while others identified different issues or causes for which they were inspired to take action. Several groups described the experience as "more than a project." Similar to Seemiller's (2006) findings, students expressed a stronger sense of connection to each other and to the community beyond the campus walls and believed that they could make a difference through continued acts of service.

## Reflection and Recommendations

We believe the intersections between leadership and civic engagement can be both designed and discovered through democratic approaches to service-learning (Saltmarsch et al., 2009). Our model of the Hunger Project provides an example for educators who wish to incorporate the high impact practice of service-learning in an introductory leadership course. Although our example was on a large scale, the principles of design using the PARE Model and DEAL Model of reflection can be applied to a course of any size or context. The following "lessons-learned" illustrate our own reflection on the experience, and offer questions to consider for future practice.

**Community partnerships are developed over time.** We acknowledge that we would not have been able to make the "leap" from community service into service-learning without a decade of partnership with the Flint Hills Breadbasket behind us. The trust and communication already established created the right environment to move from doing service *for* the Breadbasket to engaging community needs *with* the Breadbasket. As we move forward with the Hunger Project, we ask ourselves: How can we sustain this partnership through year-round engagement? What are other ways and additional partnerships we can explore to make progress on more of the root causes of hunger in our community?

**Service-learning is not an activity for the class, it IS the class.** In our program's context, the full potential of service-learning depends on intentional course design. The service experience has become the backbone of the course, providing the primary experience by which students make meaning of course topics and themes. Our curriculum emphasizes models and theories of civic leadership and social change, as well as topics relevant to these processes, such as personal strengths, inclusion, diversity, servant leadership, and group conflict. As we continue we streamlined our syllabus to cover fewer topics and created more space for the experience and reflection needed for high-impact learning and leadership development (Ash & Clayton 2004; 2009; Dugan, 2009; Kuh, 2008).

**We must articulate our own learning.** Utilizing the pedagogy of service-learning in a first-year course is an experiential process. No process is ever perfect, but both success and “failures” within our system have provided us with opportunities for learning. How do we as educators describe, evaluate, and articulate our own learning? We must continue to design and use assessment and evaluation strategies for both the process and outcomes of the Hunger Project. For example, we look to Sessa, Matos, & Hopkins’ (2009) approach for describing not only what students are learning academically, personally and civically, but also how deeply they are learning. Additionally, we desire to measure community impact and to find new ways to share our learning with stakeholders. We are seeking out better means of evaluating the experiences from our partners’ perspectives in order to foster the relationships needed to exercise leadership for sustainable, positive change for our community.

**As a community of learners, we all exercise leadership.** Each semester we must work with our partners and stakeholders to diagnose the needs of the moment in order to exercise leadership. So while this is a “project” by name, the experience itself is a dynamic, evolving process. We also realize we have much to learn about the issue of hunger itself, and can continue to broaden our own learning as a way to experiment with our roles and approaches. Additionally, we look to critical questions posed by Dugan et al. (2013) to inform both what and how we teach about leadership, hunger, and service. For example, what may be unintended consequences of our work? How does our work impact those who identify personally with the issue of hunger? And, how do we avoid the proliferation of “patriarchal, deficit-based perspectives” (Dugan et al., 2013, p. 13)?

In conclusion, we echo Johnson and Woodard’s (2014) challenge to further explore leadership education’s role in fulfilling higher education’s civic mission. Through service-learning, leadership educators can create a learning environment that challenges students to not only consider social challenges, but apply leadership for the common good through civic engagement.

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