Impacting Social Change Through Service Learning in an Introductory Leadership Course

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Abstract

Astin and Astin (2000), W.K. Kellogg Foundation, note "leadership occurs when people become concerned about something and work to engage others in bringing about positive change" (p. 23). At the University of Arizona we have taken that philosophy and integrated it into every component of our course to help students learn about and engage in the social change process. In addition to course curriculum, readings, and classroom activities that expose students to the social change process, students are asked to complete a semester-long team Social Change Project using the social change process dealing with a social issue facing an underrepresented or oppressed group. This 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. It has made a lasting impact that some students note as being their most meaningful experience in college.

Introduction

The Social Change Project is a semester-long project in a 2-credit introductory leadership course at the University of Arizona. The course is a survey course in which students are exposed to a variety of leadership topics such as values, ethics, group dynamics, social justice, and vision. The course draws from a variety of disciplines such as business, education, sociology, anthropology, philosophy, classical literature, and psychology for both in-class curriculum as well as course readings. Students have the opportunity to participate in individual, small group, and large group discussions and activities to make meaning of the curriculum. In an effort to give a context to students in learning and practicing leadership, the course is built around the semester-long Social Change Project that challenges students to directly apply knowledge from class to enact change around one or more issues facing an underrepresented or oppressed cultural group in the United States.

Theoretical Base

The leadership course is based on two similar philosophies, the Relational Leadership Model (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998) and the Social Change Model for Leadership Development (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996). The Relational Leadership Model asserts that leadership is "a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good" (Komives, et al., 1998, p. 68). The Social Change Model for Leadership Development works in tandem with the Relational Leadership Model by outlining individual, group, and community values which contribute to a process of leadership development and social change (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996). These values include being conscious of oneself, having congruence, having commitment, being collaborative, striving for common purpose, having controversy with civility, and participating in citizenship; all values that can lead toward individual and group leadership development as well as social change in the community. Not only do the curriculum, readings, and activities in the course demonstrate these philosophies, the Social Change Project (SCR) integrates these concepts in an effort so that students will learn that creating change is not only a part of leadership, but a responsibility.

In order to have students experience the relational process of leadership and create change for the betterment of others, we have shaped the SCP around the concept of service learning. For this assignment, we define service learning as "a form of experiential education in which students engage in activities that address human and community needs together with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development" (Jacoby, 1996, p. 5). Further, we utilize the social justice orientation of service-learning in which service learning is used as a "vehicle" for social change "often assessed as the redistribution of resources or social capital" (Morton, as cited in Leeds, 1999, p. 118).

Based on the integration of the Relational Leadership Model (Komives, et al., 1998), the Social Change Model for Leadership Development (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996), and social justice service-learning (Leeds, 1999), this project provides an opportunity for students to expand their leadership development while contributing to active social change. As a framework, we use the SERVICE Model (Le, 2004). This model provides a structural layout for the SCP and integrates the concepts of relational leadership, social change, and social justice service-learning. The model is as follows:
- Select Issue – select an issue within the community that everyone on the team would like to improve.
- Educate and Inform – every member should research on the history and causes of the issue. Understand why there is a need for change and how change may occur.
- Respond to the Need in an Ethical Manner – be active in the community. Provide a service that addresses the issue.

- Value Significance – reflect on the experience. How does the experience link to leadership and how can each member incorporate the education into their lives? Have discussions, activities reflecting on the experience, journal writing, or a combination of these activities to facilitate team unity and understanding of the significance of their actions involving the issue.
- Inform the Community – educate others on the information learned concerning the issue and on the experiences of the team. This could be done by having a presentation, a seminar, writing an article for a newspaper, etc. Hopefully, others will want to join the team for future projects or may come up with their own projects related to the issue.
- Celebrate and Evaluate – recognize those who contributed to the project. Evaluate the overall experience to provide suggestions for improvements in future projects.
- Enhance Education and Commitment – continue educating others and self, and keep current information about the issue. Also, the suggestions from the evaluations can be utilized as more projects are developed to further address the issue within the community.

Intended Audience

The audience for this project is approximately 220 undergraduate students across 11 sections of a 2-credit introductory leadership course. The students range in class standing with the majority as second year students. The course is required for students in the Arizona Blue Chip Program, a four-year leadership development program, and one section is focused toward members of fraternities and sororities. Students from a variety of backgrounds with various levels of campus involvement not affiliated with the Arizona Blue Chip Program or fraternities and sororities also take this course. Although this course is not part of a series of courses, there are, however, 15 other leadership courses offered through the Center for Student Involvement & Leadership and the College of Education in which the concept of social change is integrated. These include courses such as Critical Perspectives on Leadership in Society, Social Justice Leadership, and Service Leadership.

Learning Objectives

The learning objectives for this assignment include exposing students to a process for creating social change. They also involve familiarizing them with one current social issue in depth and have an ongoing project in which students can apply what they are learning in the class in a manner that benefits both the students and the community.

Resources and Materials Needed

Resources needed for this assignment include a worksheet that students fill out during the first or second class session indicating interest in learning more about a

particular cultural group. Cultural groups can include racial, ethnic, or religious groups or can include groups such as immigrants, ex-felons, war veterans, or any underrepresented or oppressed cultural group. Culture is broadly defined. In addition to a worksheet for students to indicate cultural groups they would like to explore, another helpful resource is a list of local agencies that serve the cultural groups identified for the project. It is beneficial to contact some of these agencies for guidance and support as well as to inform them of the project ahead of time.

Lesson Outline

The project is structured around the SERVICE Model (Le, 2004) to expose students to one comprehensive way in which to begin the process of social change. Students begin by selecting a cultural group in the United States that could be considered either an underrepresented or oppressed group in which they do not identify. Students then engage in a variety of activities, research, service, and reflection exercises that help them learn about issues facing this cultural group and how to create social change around these issues. The following is an outline of the project:

S: Select an Issue

During the second week of class students fill out the SCP worksheet that lists a variety of underrepresented or oppressed cultural groups in the United States. Students are to indicate which particular groups they have an interest in learning more about in regard to social change. The instructor then puts students into teams of three to five who may share similar interests to agree upon one cultural group for the project.

E: Educate Yourself Part I: Sub-Population Education

As a team, students research their chosen cultural group and discuss four areas, culture overview, media/current events, laws and policies, and physical environment, in a 10-12 page group paper. The purpose is for students to gain an understanding of some of the needs of the cultural group and to critically analyze structures and systems that may create barriers for this group.

E: Educate Yourself Part II: Proposal

Students then design an experience in which they can explore this cultural group in person and not simply through research. Each student is asked to write a one to two page proposal outlining his or her plan for a Cultural Experience and a Cultural Interview. These are defined as follows:

- Cultural Experience – this experience is an individual activity that includes visitation, shadowing, or participation. The purpose is to have students interact with the cultural group in a direct way to learn about this culture from a different lens. Each student can select from the following methods to design

a Cultural Experience. Students should gain appropriate permission when engaging in the Cultural Experience so as not to intrude on the members of the cultural group.

- Visitation – this may include attending a service, meeting, rally, or event, or going on a tour or visiting a place relating to the cultural group.
- Shadowing – this may include shadowing someone from the cultural group.
- Participation – this may include participating in rituals, traditions, or experiences of this cultural group.

- Cultural Interview – each student interviews someone who identifies or works with their chosen cultural group to learn more about his/her everyday experiences. The student's proposal should include information on which he or she plans to interview and what he or she would like to learn. The purpose of the Cultural Interview is to have students be able to connect real individuals to learning about the cultural group. It is important that students understand that one person does not represent an entire population of people. Yet, there is a value in being able to talk with and ask questions of someone in the cultural group to learn first-hand about personal experiences.

E: Educate Yourself Part III: Interaction

Each student is to turn in a two to three page reflection of the Cultural Experience and the Cultural Interview reflecting on what he or she has learned through each of these activities.

R: Respond to the Need

Each student does a minimum of two hours of service related to an issue that the cultural group faces. The service can be done individually or as a team. Each student is to turn in a signed "service hours" worksheet confirming volunteer location and hours volunteered. The purpose of this component of the assignment is to have students intentionally serve the community for the betterment of the cultural group they chose with the idea of social change in mind. The prior assignments will help shape students' understanding of what the needs are of the cultural group so the service is meaningful and relevant for everyone involved.

V: Value the Significance

Students individually write a four to five page paper about their experiences thus far with the SCP. The papers should include an overview of the experiences they have had with the project, lessons learned, and any impact the project has had on them. The purpose of this component of the project is to have students interpret and reflect on their experiences to make meaning of the social change process and how this process can be applied to other social issues.

I: Inform the Community

Each team provides a 25-minute group presentation to the class on their experiences with this project. They are to include the following:
- Overview of the culture.
- Media/current issues.
- Laws/policies.
- Physical environment.
- Overview of cultural experiences of team members.
- Overview of cultural interviews of team members.
- Overview of service contributed by team members.
- Vision for change.
- Ideas to reach that vision.

This sharing provides both an opportunity for reflection for team members to make larger meaning of their experiences and an opportunity for other classmates to engage in the information presented to perhaps mobilize them to participate in another area of social change.

C: Celebrate and Evaluate

Each student writes a one page personal action plan committing to one tangible and measurable action he or she will take before the end of the semester to address this issue and reduce barriers for this cultural group. The purpose is to encourage students to be both visionary in their social change endeavors and stay engaged with the issue to try to enact change.

E: Enhance Education

The final aspect of this project is to learn more about the global scope of issues that may face this cultural group. Each student is to research a country other than the United States to learn about any issues/barriers and support that the cultural group experiences. In a three to five page paper, students are to write about:
- Issues/barriers facing the cultural group in the selected country.
- What this country is doing well to positively address these issues (policies, laws, environment, etc.).
- How the country made such advancements (social movements, legislation, religious influence, or it was never an issue).
- What the United States can learn from this other country when it comes to issues facing this cultural group.

The purpose is to encourage the students to look globally for ideas and creative methods for social change. This can be advantageous both for understanding the solutions or ideas that are implemented in other countries but also to understand processes of social change outside of the United States. In addition, this

assignment leaves students with the idea that the work is not done and that social change is an ongoing effort.

Effectiveness

This project reflects the philosophy that service and social justice advocacy are major components of leadership and social change. The SCP thoughtfully involves pre-reflection, a variety of learning methods, and post-reflection of the experience as a way for students to learn and understand about social inequity and the process of social change. In addition, it is our hope that students become engaged in a project that will hopefully contribute to the social change efforts needed around a particular issue. A multitude of research especially over the last 20 years has highlighted both the importance and effectiveness of service learning in an academic setting. For instance, participation in community service helps students be more empathetic, have more positive self-attitudes, and have "more highly internalized moral standards" (Allen & Rushton, as cited in Berger & Milem, 2002, p. 87). In addition, service learning "positively affected students' beliefs that they can make a difference in the world" and that "leadership and political influence are important aspirations" (Giles & Eyler, as cited in Berger & Milem, 2002, p. 87).

In addition, this project challenges students to a "social justice" orientation of service learning, one from "charity to social change" (Kahne & Westheimer, as cited in Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004, p. 55). This social justice orientation involves having the service learning be experiential, a valued part of the curriculum, collaborative with other students in striving to create change, "intellectual and analytical, as students engage in inquiry and seek out multiple perspectives," integrating of diverse perspectives, and "activist" (Wade, as cited in Boyle-Baise & Langford, 2004, p. 55). Service learning, in turn, "may lead students to 'a deeper understanding of the human condition, including the structural factors that reinforce poverty and prejudice . . . (and) to the development of a lifelong commitment to working for equality and justice'" (Bachen, as cited in Novek, 2000, p. 9).

Results to Date

The data gathered over the past four years indicates that students are greatly impacted by being exposed to social inequity and learning about how to engage in social change. One student identified the cultural experience portion as having been one of the best college experiences she had ever had, whereas another discussed this as having been extremely influential in her understanding of power and privilege. Others reflected on the value of serving the community and indicated wanting to continue doing the community service they started through the project after the course was over. Another student summed it up by saying that what she got out of the entire experience was learning "how to use my leadership skills to promote positive change." As an instructor for this course, I believe that

using this project in the course not only provides an opportunity for students to learn about social change, but it gives context and meaning to the leadership concepts integrated into the entire course.

Conclusion

Although this course is a survey course in leadership development covering topics such as values, ethics, mission, vision, power, and group dynamics, the concept of social change is integrated into each class session, each assignment, and each class reading. We, at the Center for Student Involvement & Leadership, believe that if we want students to engage in responsible and ethical leadership to create social change that social change must be embedded into the curriculum. In addition, one of the most effective methods for developing leadership in students is through group projects and service learning (Astin & Astin, 2000). We have found that building the course around a project such as this enables students to give context and meaning to the various components of leadership they learn in the classroom as well as challenging students to be committed to a cause, "care about the common good," and serve as agents of change (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 31).

The University of Arizona's Center for Student Involvement & Leadership has created the SCP to challenge students to apply knowledge and experiences from the course as well as learn the depth of the social change process. This project combines leadership, social justice, and service through a variety of learning methods for students to learn more about a particular cultural group, issues they may face, and how to engage in social change around those issues. In the future, it is our hope that students will not only practice the social change process within the course, but be truly engaged as social change agents throughout their lives.

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Biography

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