

## ALESHIRE VENTURE GRANT PROCESS:

### Utilizing community partnerships and grant-making to enhance student leadership development

#### Abstract

Over the last twelve years, an innovative community engagement practice has immersed undergraduate students enrolled in a 300-level leadership course in adaptive leadership by giving them power to make progress on complex challenges at the local level. This unique partnership between a university, donors, and a local United Way, makes students equal partners in awarding and distributing up to \$10,000 per year to local organizations seeking to meet a complex community need. Within a framework detailed in a Memorandum of Understanding established among the three partners, students create a request for proposals (RFP), distribute RFPs, review proposals, visit sites, and determine which priorities to fund that are in alignment with both the donors' and United Way's vision. The experience culminates in a formal recommendation to the United Way Board of Directors and the donors for approval and allocation of funds. Throughout the process, the President/CEO of the United Way, the instructors of the course, and the donors mentor the students directly. A preliminary study exploring the student learning outcomes for past program participants found positive outcomes related to community involvement, teamwork, civic engagement, and critical thinking.

#### Introduction

Leadership educators have long known the value of community engagement in promoting student leadership development. This has been found to be especially true in Washburn University's Leadership Skills Development (LE300), a course designed to help students translate leadership theory to practice. The course also has a primary outcome of helping students understand the important role of conflict in effective group decision-making. Additional course learning outcomes relate to philanthropy and social change with the purpose of differentiating between adaptive and technical problems. Given that community engagement has been found to promote these student learning outcomes (Dugan & Komives, 2007),

students who complete the course are required to participate in a community action project. While these projects have varied in both the type of organization with which students collaborate as well as scope of work, one project that has historically been utilized once per year to help achieve these outcomes is the Aleshire Venture Grant (Venture Grant). Joe and Janet Aleshire, generous community donors, saw the opportunity to involve youth in the decision-making processes associated with philanthropy and created the Venture Grant. Now entering its thirteenth year of existence, this project allows students to work in small groups to move through the grant-making process with real funds at stake. The project culminates in a pitch to the United Way of Greater Topeka (United Way) Board of Directors for funding approval to the

chosen organizations.

This article will discuss how an innovative community experience can couple philanthropy with civic engagement. The experience benefits not just students, but also the greater community. We will discuss the strategic partnership and program structure which allow the program to be effectively executed by students each year. Additionally, we will explore the positive student outcomes that emerged from a preliminary study associated with the Venture Grant program related to teamwork, civic engagement and community involvement, and critical thinking. Finally, we will offer reflections and recommendations for leadership educators to consider as they integrate community engagement into leadership curriculum.

## Review of Related Scholarship

Arensdorf and Brunghardt (2017) posit that, "Higher education institutions, including leadership education and development programs, hold a responsibility to prepare students to be active and engaged citizens" (p. 45). According to Johnson and Woodard (2014), leadership education should not rely exclusively on theory and classroom activities, but should also incorporate real-world experiences. This form of civic engagement complements leadership theory and enhances leadership capacities through practical experience.

Kuh (2008) identified service and community-based learning experiences as an instructional strategy that is often a required component of a course. According to Kuh (2008):

The idea is to give students direct experience with issues they are studying in the curriculum and with ongoing efforts to analyze and solve problems in the community...These programs model the idea that giving something

back to the community is an important college outcome, and that working with community partners is good preparation for citizenship, work, and life. (p. 11)

As students move beyond analyzing their personal leadership behaviors to consider the role they play in teams and larger systems, the LE300 course promotes this shift in thinking by offering a hands-on experience for students to serve their community while demonstrating leadership. Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) reinforce the importance of service-learning to the student in bridging academic content to real-world experiences. Kuh et al. (2005) found internships and experiential learning not only provide opportunities for application, but also enrich the campus when students bring the learning back.

Intentionality is important in crafting community-engaged experiences. In their analysis of a first-year service-learning course, Priest et al. (2015) found that having the experience as the "backbone" of the course, as compared to an activity as an element of the course, provided the greatest learning. The Venture Grant is indeed a critical component of the course, progressing throughout the entire semester and serving as the conduit for translating course concepts into lived experience. The instructors intentionally link course concepts to the Venture Grant experience as new concepts are explored to create a cohesive learning environment. While this intentionality offers significant structure for students and clearly outlines important goals and milestones that should be achieved, the project is complex and not without challenge. Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) found that, "Community service can be unpredictable and often confusing because of complexities presented to students in various situations. Providing space for students to discuss with peers is critical for a positive and reflective service-learning experience" (p. 235).

It is important in experiential learning that students

have opportunity to effectively reflect on their experiences (Guthrie & Bertrand Jones, 2012), which is why the Venture Grant requires that students work in small groups and document each step of their experience in a collaborative team notebook in addition to reporting out on individual student learning through oral project updates. McKim et al. (2017) determined it important to take into consideration previous leadership experiences of students within the course when developing experiences, so professors encourage students to apply skills learned in other contexts to the Venture Grant project. The relationship between the university and the community partner must also be considered so that “a university must work with and not for our community partners” (Arensdorf & Brunghardt, 2017, p. 49). This is particularly important, as a critical outcome of the Venture Grant is to engage students as equal partners in the grant-making process to benefit the greater community.

Assessing learning experiences is also important to ensure students are acquiring the desired learning outcomes. Goertzen (2013) called for leadership educators to progress on the various levels of academic assessment, including assignment-level, course-level, and program-level assessment, while recognizing in particular a dearth of work in the area of program-level assessment. Goertzen (2013) pointed to limitations of assessing assignment-specific outcomes, while recognizing “these course-embedded teaching strategies can provide valuable insights regarding student learning” (p. 58). Valid Assessment of Learning in Undergraduate Education (VALUE) rubrics are tools developed by the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) as a component of the LEAP program (Drezek McConnell & Rhodes, 2017). A preliminary study of the program looked at participants completing the Venture Grant program prior to 2016, utilizing various criteria from the VALUE rubrics to understand student learning in the areas of teamwork, civic engagement and community involvement, and critical thinking. The results overall indicate positive student learning related to community involvement, teamwork, civic

engagement, and critical thinking.

## Description of the Practice

The Venture Grant Project is a community-based project that occurs once per year in the 300-level course of Washburn University’s Leadership Studies Minor curriculum. This course, focused on leadership skills development, has course learning objectives primarily related to translating leadership theories learned in earlier classes into practice and, likewise, being able to analyze observed leadership utilizing theory. While a variety of community change projects have been used to achieve learning in the course, in recent years select sections of the course have focused solely on the Venture Grant, allowing the instructors to better integrate the shared experiences of the students into this project into the course curriculum. In addition to the outcomes established by the donors in the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the course instructors hope that students develop in areas of teamwork, critical thinking, and civic engagement, all related to course learning objectives.

### Memorandum of Understanding

Most of the community projects utilized by the program do not have formal agreements in place to guide the relationship. However, with the Venture Grant program, a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was established between the donors, the United Way, and Washburn University. This ensures that roles and responsibilities are clear among all those involved with the partnership and has been found to help students understand how to best utilize the expertise of each partner within the project. This MOU helps provide the basic process for students to follow, but with ample opportunity for them to develop their own path toward goal achievement within the delineated parameters. The MOU (United Way of Greater Topeka, 2009) is comprised of sections related to purpose, goal, committee membership, actions, basic funding criteria, basic and operating

guidelines. Below is additional information about these sections:

#### Purpose

The purpose of the Aleshire Venture Grant Program, hereinafter called Program, is to acquaint students at Washburn University with philanthropic opportunities and their future civic responsibilities while providing funding to stimulate the initiative of effective non-profit program development that addresses early childhood development (prenatal care to six years of age). (United Way of Greater Topeka, 2009, p. 1)

#### Goal

The goal of the Program is for students to gain experience reviewing budgets and program information, set priorities for funding and make allocations recommendations. As a result, students will gain skills preparing them for future careers while becoming knowledgeable about existing services and the difficulties of allocating funds to competing and yet worthwhile causes.

Students will gain exposure to community involvement with the expectation that they will carry the value and importance of community contribution into their future careers. Developing Servant Leaders and helping children develop to their potential are the ultimate goals. (United Way of Greater Topeka, 2009, p. 1)

#### Committee Membership

The Program shall be administered by a committee comprised of at least 5 students from Washburn University that are enrolled in the Leadership 300 course. The committee will review the Program grant applications and make funding recommendations to the United Way Board of Directors.

Best efforts will be made to ensure diversity of committee representation across academic disciplines and student interests. All students serving on this committee are required to attend the first meeting (orientation), all agency interviews/visits, and the final presentation to the United Way Board of Directors. The orientation meeting focuses on the philosophy, purpose and structure of United Way and informs members of the services being provided by the United Way agencies. (United Way of Greater Topeka, 2009, p. 1)

#### Actions

- A committee shall be formed in the first two weeks of the semester by LE 300 students, with complete grant process completed by the end of the semester.
- In the first month of the course (September) the committee will develop the Request for Proposals to be distributed by the end of September.
- The committee will review the Program grant applications, select grant finalists, and conduct interviews and site visits during November.
- The committee will make funding recommendations, which will be performed as part of a final program presentation to United Way Board of Directors in December.
- The RFP will be designed, and grant applications will be evaluated, based on the basic funding criteria below. (United Way of Greater Topeka, 2009, pp. 1-2)

#### Basic Funding Criteria

This section of the MOU details organizations that would be eligible

to receive funds. These organizations include those that are tax exempt, focus on childhood development, support programs within the county not currently funded by the United Way, have a board of directors, have bylaws, have non-discriminatory practices, and are able to demonstrate effectiveness in performance and financial accountability (United Way of Greater Topeka, 2009, p. 2).

#### Basic Operating Guidelines

This section of the MOU parallels processes that must be followed by the organizations applying for the funds (United Way of Greater Topeka, 2009, pp. 2-3).

#### Program Process

As explored earlier, Joe and Janet Aleshire commit up to \$10,000 during the semester to the United Way. The MOU clarifies that the funds must be used to “stimulate the initiative of effective non-profit program development that addresses early childhood development (prenatal care to six years of age)” (United Way of Greater Topeka, 2009, p. 1). What makes the distribution of these funds unique, however, is that the students in the LE300 course investigate how these committed funds can best be utilized to create sustainable change within the local community. This is achieved through an intentional semester-long process that involves the donors, the instructors of the course, the President and CEO of the local United Way, and the students in the course. While the overarching process is guided by the MOU established by the donors, the students have significant responsibility in determining their own timeline, recognizing that decisions must be made in time to present to the United Way Board of Directors meeting at the end of the semester.

The donors and the President/CEO of the United Way provide students with significant levels of mentorship throughout this process. Both sets of constituents present to the students at the beginning of the semester regarding their roles within the process.

The donors provide their vision for the project, overarching goals, and passion for philanthropy and investing in young people. When a former Venture Grant student and participant in the preliminary research study of the program was asked about their top takeaways, this was their response:

This was one of the best group projects that I have ever had. Like, [named the group members], were all on my team and it was very cool to work with them. Being able to work and engage in our community was probably one of my top three favorite things as well, and just really getting to work with the Aleshires and see how passionate they are about the community and being able to give back in such a positive way to be able to help us, help the community was really cool. (student interviewee, personal communication, 2016)

The President and CEO of the United Way shares with the students how this process follows the model of the United Way. Furthermore, she serves as a resource to the students throughout the semester, providing guidance on the development of the Request for Proposals, assisting in providing names and contact information of organizations aligned with the scope of the students’ project, and anything else they may need throughout the semester.

#### Integration into Curriculum

Historically only a select few of the students in a given section of the class participated in the Venture Grant project. In recent years, however, after research verified the student learning, instructors decided that all students in select sections of the class would participate in the project. After the project’s initial introduction, students are assigned to small groups. In these small groups, students then work through the process of developing the scope of the RFPs for their group. For example, in one semester, one student group wanted to focus on child literacy and another group wanted to focus on prenatal healthcare. Both projects aligned with the overarching scope of the

project as defined by the MOU, but the RFPs were narrowed because of student research and interest, and to help organizations better understand if their projects are in alignment with the scope.

A few weeks into the semester, students present their project definitions which include scope, deliverables, and a timeline to achieve the deliverables. As much of this course focuses on effective group processes, students also share a team contract which includes a group name, logo, and slogan, as well as expectations of group members. These activities also help the group develop a team identity and norms. Throughout the semester, students provide periodic project updates on their group's progression. These are intended to help students consider challenges, successes, opportunities for feedback, how class concepts relate to their project, and what they have learned since their last update.

Students are required to keep a team notebook that is submitted at the end of the semester. This incorporates items such as their team contract, meeting agendas, strengths and weaknesses of each meeting, action items from each meeting, and what they have learned. This notebook also contains a celebrations section where they detail what they did to celebrate their accomplishments as a group. While at first this notebook may seem tedious, it allows students to see how proper organization can help create optimum team performance both through this project and into future work.

At the end of the semester, students provide a final presentation that brings all their learning from the project together and includes many of the same items within the project updates. In this final presentation, however, student groups also make their recommendations related to grant dollar allocation. Each group can ask questions of one another and justify why they are making these particular recommendations. Students then engage in a consensus-building process to determine how to allocate the resources. Each group brings recommendations which often differ in terms of organizational preference and allocation amount;

thus, the students must make difficult decisions regarding how to use a finite set of resources. To effectively build consensus among the class, a facilitator from the United Way comes into class and teaches a consensus model that allows each student to honor their personal preferences while structuring discussion and decision-making in an efficient way. This process also allows the students to demonstrate critical thinking and apply class concepts, including the prevention of groupthink and the importance of cognitive conflict in decision-making.

Students next integrate their two final presentations into one succinct presentation that will be shared with the United Way Board of Directors. It is this board that will ultimately approve utilization of the funds in this way. When students present to the board, they have approximately 20 minutes to present, followed by Q&A. The board expects that students will justify their recommendations, and the board also spends a significant amount of time asking students about their learning. In the end, this component of the project is often the students' favorite.

## Discussion of Outcomes/Results

A preliminary study, completed in 2016, of the outcomes of this project provided initial data that confirm students are learning a great deal throughout this project. The study found that students who participated in the program reported learning about teamwork, civic engagement, and critical thinking through participation. A survey was distributed to 27 alumni of the course; 14 individuals responded to the survey for a 52% response rate. Survey questions were adapted from AAC&U (2009a, 2009b, & 2009c) rubrics related to teamwork, civic engagement, and critical thinking. Students indicated on a scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent) how this project impacted their skills in these constructs. The following represents the number of students indicating a 4 or 5 on that scale:

Teamwork:

- 86% (n=12) - contributing to team

meetings

14%

- 93% (n=13) - engaging the team in a way to allow all ideas to be equally weighted
- 93% (n=13) - individually contributing outside of the team environment
- 79% (n=11) - fostering a constructive team environment
- 86% (n=12) - demonstrating adjustments on own attitudes and beliefs because of working within and learning from diverse communities.

- 5+ hours/week increased from 21% to 22%

While these initial data provide evidence of the learning we believed was taking place, through our years of working with students on this project, we have also seen the students grow in their connections to the local community. The students learn of the complexity of the issues in the community within which they currently reside, and they also have increased awareness of the many organizations working to address these complex issues.

#### Civic Engagement:

- 86% (n=12) - demonstrated adjustments on own attitudes and beliefs because of working within and learning from diverse environments
- 71% (n=10) - demonstrated the ability to collaboratively work across and within community contexts and structures to achieve a civic aim

#### Critical Thinking:

- 50% (n=7) - had a full understanding of the comprehensive issues facing the situation at hand
- 85% (n=12) - thoroughly (systematically and methodically) analyzes own and others' assumptions and carefully evaluates that relevance of contexts when presenting a position)

After the experience, students were asked about the amount of weekly community involvement before and after participation. Results found:

- Zero hours/week decreased from 29% to 7%.
- 2-3 hours/week increased from 36% to 43%
- 3-4 hours/week increased from 7% to 14%
- 4-5 hours/week increased from 7% to

#### Reflections of the Practitioners

As the data indicate, students believe that this initiative is helping them develop in desired areas related to teamwork, civic engagement and community involvement, and critical thinking. Their self-reported amount of time engaged in the community also increased after program participation. While there are many challenges associated with group projects, especially for those projects that run for the entire semester and engage multiple stakeholders, our experience has been that the learning far outweighs any challenges associated with this community work. Students grow both personally and professionally as they navigate social relationships, learn time management, evade groupthink, address conflict, and identify communication strategies that allow their team to achieve the desired goals. Students have complete ownership of the process and the ultimate success of the project. They are responsible for creating a proposal that organizations can realistically complete, for following up with community partners and answering questions, evaluating proposals according to the RFP guidelines, and ultimately recommending where donors should invest their hard-earned dollars.

Additionally, it would be nearly impossible to have this learning occur without the three-way partnership of the United Way, donors, and Washburn University. It has been critical that the three partners meet

frequently and candidly discuss areas for growth from semester to semester. The partnership is honored with clear communication and an outline of expectations which allow each party to achieve its established goal. The effort put into fostering a mutually beneficial partnership has been prioritized from the beginning, allowing the program to continue even considering transitions in contacts and point people at the institution and United Way.

We believe that the real-life outcomes that are associated with the project foster the greatest development within the students. From the beginning of the project, the donors, the President/CEO of the United Way, and the instructors communicate the importance of success within the project. Past success stories often inspire the students. Even when they are in the most challenging moments of the experience, the students know that a successful investment of these funds can make a difference and that they will need to justify their decisions to the Board of Directors at the end of the experience. These very real outcomes motivate the students to invest themselves more fully into the experience.

## Recommendations and Future Research

The Venture Grant is a unique community engagement experience that may not be able to be replicated in every community. It takes strong community connections and intentionality to identify both donor partners and a community agency interested in a long-term partnership. However, there are some creative strategies that others might explore in considering a partnership of this nature.

One of the first steps we would encourage is for educators seeking similar partnerships to seek support from university foundation or alumni offices to help create space for these partnerships to emerge. Perhaps the foundation already has partnerships in place that could involve student decision-making, or the foundation may have donors who might be interested in making a commitment that would allow community impact with the additional outcome of

student learning through the process. Additionally, other local foundations may be interested in involving students in reviewing funding requests or assisting donors in investing their donor-advised funds. Perhaps there is a donor who has not yet made a gift but the opportunity to make such a significant impact and inspire the students to be philanthropists themselves would inspire such a gift.

A community partnership of this nature should also be intentionally integrated into the curriculum and be designed to help students shift their perspectives from self to the role of self in a group or community context. It is critical to scaffold leadership skill development in a way that gives students the individual skills they need to be successful in the project before they are thrust into a high-stakes environment with community partners that have a vested interest in the final result. While allowing students to develop their own processes and protocols, we have found it helpful to allow this to occur within a larger, pre-established framework that will give the students some sort of guidance so that they can find success within the given time frame.

Perhaps one of the strongest recommendations we would make is to consider adding infrastructure to these community projects that impact student learning. In this particular case, the MOU has been critical in ensuring that all parties involved know their roles and responsibilities. Because of this, students know who to reach out around given issues they are experiencing, and they can develop mentorship relationships with these community leaders.

We are currently in the process of launching a research study to follow-up on the preliminary findings and explore student learning at a deeper level. The initial research project included interviews that should be revisited, and participants who have completed the project since the initial study was conducted should be included. There is also additional research to be done related the community organizations receiving grant funding from the project in previous years to learn more about program impact and the sustainability efforts the organizations put into place

to promote a lasting impact. These data should be shared to better understand if the community partners understand this as a learning partnership as found in the literature to be important, and how this partnership can be improved. At the time of the initial data collection, only one group of students in the class was participating in the project. However, two groups now participate and must combine recommendations at the end of the experience. This was partially due to the very positive results found with the project. Additional research should include surveying or interviewing participants who have participated since this shift.

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## Conclusion

The Venture Grant process enhances the learning of students within Washburn University's 300-level leadership course. A preliminary study supports our anecdotal evidence that students learn about teamwork, civic engagement and community involvement, and critical thinking through participation. To yield the greatest student learning, we have worked to establish clear expectations among the many parties involved in facilitating this student learning through the creation of a Memorandum of Understanding. We have also worked to create opportunities for mentorship by Joe and Janet Aleshire, and the President/CEO of the United Way. We believe the importance of the outcome compels the students to challenge themselves in ways they might not in other projects. We believe that other leadership development programs may find success in visiting with their college/university foundations or other foundations within the community to explore opportunities of this nature.

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