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## Developing Leaders Through Service at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

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# Developing Leaders Through Service at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater

## **Abstract**

First year learning community (LC) freshmen entering as education majors participated in year-long activities related to service learning and leadership development. Activities included fall cohort classes with shared content, a common read, and a spring seminar that included leadership learning, fund raising, and a short-term service project in an alternative school setting. Students were compared with other LC freshman not engaged in the project, non-education LC students, and those not in learning communities across measures of attitudes toward volunteerism and diverse groups, grades, and rates of volunteering. Additional qualitative data were collected in regard to self-reflection of those involved in the service-learning project. Survey results were inconclusive, though GPA and volunteer involvement data were positive for students who participated. These findings are discussed in light of current best practice regarding high impact practices and Liberal Education America's Promise and support the continued use of first year service learning and leadership activities.

## **Keywords**

service learning, leadership, high impact practices

Liberal Education America's Promise (LEAP) identifies ten high-impact practices (HIP), including: first year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, service learning and community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects (Kuh, 2008)<sup>1</sup>. In a report from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE, 2013), fifty-eight percent of first year students engaged in one or more HIP. Research also demonstrates that HIP can increase student learning and performance as well as support students' personal development and engagement (NSSE, 2013). On the other hand, there is evidence suggesting that while all students may benefit from the use of HIP, those who may benefit the most are students at risk for academic failure or who are historically underrepresented and potentially less prepared for college (Pascarella, Seifert, and Blaich, 2010).

This paper reports on a service learning experience for first year learning community students, who are also engaged in additional HIP (i.e. first year seminar and common intellectual experiences) resulting in high-impact practice immersion during their freshman year of college. As a report on practice, we focus on how we developed the project, on student outcomes, and on how we implemented successive years of the service learning component.

### **Project Description**

During the 2010-2011 academic year twenty-eight freshmen at the University of Wisconsin – Whitewater enrolled in one education learning community, Together We Teach, which was one of many learning communities across four colleges. In the spring semester, 17 of these students participated in a service and leadership development project led by their learning community coordinator (first author). The purpose of the project was to pilot a cohort model of learning with integrated best practices on the attitudes, outcomes, and experiences of freshmen education majors engaging in service learning activities.

In the fall semester of 2010, learning community students were enrolled in three classes addressing communication, society & diversity and special education. Instructors for all three courses utilized themes from the movie *Freedom Writers* (2007). The movie is based on the true story of a public high school teacher, Erin Gruwell, in her first year of teaching at an inner-city public school and her students, at-risk learners who use writing as a means to reflect on themselves and their society to make a change. This movie focuses on themes of adversity, tolerance, trust, personal growth, family, service learning, and success

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<sup>1</sup> For descriptions of these practices, the reader can consult [www.aacu.org/leap/hips](http://www.aacu.org/leap/hips).

as one teacher used her classroom to impact her community. These themes and ideas were discussed across three classes for Whitewater students.

In the communication related course, *Freedom Writers* focused students on relationships and communication. Students discussed how Gruwell did not have open communication with her husband as well as with some of her colleagues. On the other hand, students also looked at positive relationships including the relationships Gruwell had with her students, superintendent, and members of the community. In the course on society and diversity, students discussed issues of race, ethnicity, class, and class mobility as seen in the film. Students were given the opportunity to write an anthropological film review using themes and ideas discussed in class in relation to the movie, supplemented by articles, the textbook, and real life situations. In the class related to special education, students reflected on how the movie represented diversity in the classroom. More specifically, the movie catalyzed discussions about how ability and/or perception impact student learning. Finally, the movie helped to frame discussions of how teachers impact classrooms and how students interact with one another in school.

The following semester (Spring, 2011), Together We Teach freshman were given the option of enrolling in an independent study class that focused on the concept of service leadership in education; seventeen freshmen from the cohort enrolled. The basis of the course was to expose students to the concepts of service, leadership, and diversity in education and to give them an opportunity to identify, develop, and implement a service project, all of which was intended to foster reflection. During the course of the spring semester the students engaged in a common read, *Teach with Your Heart: Lessons I Learned from the Freedom Writers* (Gruwell, 2007) and planned and implemented a service project. The UWW students worked with teachers and students from an alternative public high school in Milwaukee, Wisconsin for their project. All activities were student led, beginning with contact and communications with staff at the school, through preparations for and implementation of a bake sale fundraiser on campus, and culminating with a day long service day at the high school, working alongside students enrolled at the high school.

For the service project with the high school, Together We Teach students cleaned and reorganized a science classroom as well as a greenhouse. Students from the school also helped with the cleaning process and students from both schools bonded throughout the day. Many students reported their favorite part of the experience was getting to work with and know the students at the school. While there, at the request of the school staff, the Whitewater students also spoke with classes, encouraging the high school students to continue their education. Whitewater students talked about the reasons they chose to continue their education after high school and addressed some of the challenges involved in choosing a college. The Whitewater students provided booklets to the students

regarding the campus and fields of study at Whitewater and also provided the teachers with classroom sets of information regarding the other Wisconsin universities and colleges.

### **Methods**

The purpose of the Servant Leadership project was to pilot coordinated, focused study for freshman education majors, culminating in a service learning experience supported by a seminar class exploring concepts of diversity, volunteerism, service and leadership. We collected data to assess the impact of the pilot on student experiences and outcomes, as well as on attitudes toward involvement in service learning. We assessed impacts through pre and post surveys, student grades, and rate/type of volunteer service of the college students before, during and (projected) after the project. For these assessments, we identified three comparison groups: students who participated in both fall and spring activities related to the project; non-education learning community students; and university freshmen who were not involved with learning communities.

Pre and post surveys addressed how the students perceived diversity and volunteerism. Students received the surveys in the fall semester and then again in the spring semester after the learning community group had been involved in the servant leadership course. The surveys utilized questions developed by Phillips & Ziller (1997) and Reeb, Katsuyama, Sammon, & Yoder (1998) and queried students about their views on diversity, volunteerism, and personal involvement in volunteer opportunities. The surveys also assessed the rate and type of volunteer service that students participated in based their on their responses to questions about past volunteer experiences, present volunteer experiences, and anticipated future experiences. Finally, we compared the spring grades of students in Together We Teach learning community to a sample of non-education learning community freshman as well as to non-learning community freshman. Students in the learning community service learning spring course also participated in reflective writing activities throughout the semester. While not yet analyzed, these data provided insights into student perceptions of the course and related activities.

### **Results**

Data collected during this project had varied outcomes. In short, survey data and GPA data are inconclusive while volunteerism data indicate a positive impact of learning community involvement and participation in the service leadership course. Student reflections show that they felt the course and related activities had

a positive impact on their college experience. We discuss these results more fully below.

### **Survey Outcomes**

Survey results did not demonstrate any difference in the attitudes of students across the three groups, which may be an artifact of survey methodology. For instance, the non-learning community groups were surveyed less consistently than the learning community groups. In the fall, the survey was given to a group of freshman students who were enrolled in a course together. In the spring semester, a different sample group was surveyed, and in smaller numbers.. The sample size in both semesters was very low, but especially low in the spring semester. Finally we cannot be sure that the data collected were valid and reliable because the sample sizes are so small.

### **Volunteer Rates**

The rate of volunteerism from the fall to spring of the students who were enrolled in Together We Teach (TWeT) compared to non-learning community freshman showed a difference, although the statistical significance of this has not established. The TWeT group reported a volunteer rate of 36% in fall and 40% in spring (an increase of 4%) and the Non-LC cohort reported a rate of 31% in fall and 28% in spring (a decrease of 3%). In all groups, the majority of students reported that they had volunteered in the past and that they were extremely likely to volunteer in the future. These findings are interesting as the literature suggests that in recent years (2006-2009), only 27-29% of high schools students ages 16-18 have volunteered. The rate of volunteerism in this age group has declined from the early 2000's with a volunteer rate high of 35% in 2005 (Census Current Population Survey, September Volunteering Supplement, 2002-2009). Perhaps students entering the education field have a higher rate of early volunteer experiences. Program staff postulate that long term data might indicate a continued positive impact of this freshman service learning experience on student rates of volunteer involvement. Future research should follow learning community freshmen involved in service projects throughout their college career to determine if rates of volunteerism might increase long term as a result of initial college involvement.

### **Student GPA**

Freshmen who participated in a learning community received, on average, higher grade point averages than those students who did not participate in learning

communities in the fall semester. Table 1 shows that LC students who participated in the spring semester service and leadership seminar (Group D) had a similar GPA to their immediate LC peers (Group C) who did not participate in the spring course, 2.98 compared to 3.01; and higher GPAs than other learning community freshmen (Group B). Specifically, students who were not in a learning community (Group A) received grade point averages .58 points lower than their learning community peers who participated in the spring seminar class (Group D). Students in the education LC involved in the spring course (Group D) also showed a higher GPA than their non-education LC peers (Group B) with GPA .11 higher in spring semester. It is interesting to note that regardless of group affiliation, LC freshmen had higher GPA than non-LC freshmen (institutional data also show this trend across ten years of LC implementation at UWW). While these data do not really demonstrate the positive impact of service learning involvement across a semester, they do support the use of multiple high-impact practices, particularly learning communities, with first year college students.

*Table 1.*

Grade data by project cohort group

Group	A	B	C	D
Cohort	Non-LC Freshmen (n = 31)	Non-Education LC Freshmen (n = 15)	Education LC (TWeT) Freshmen not involved in spring course (n = 14)	Education LC (TWeT) Freshmen involved in spring course (n = 14)
Spring 2011 GPA Avg.	2.40	2.87	3.01	2.98

## Student Reflections

After the Together We Teach freshmen finished their service project, students wrote reflection letters regarding their experiences. Jade, a freshman participating in the service leadership seminar wrote, “I gained a sense of how I can contribute to other people through service leadership. I also learned how I can incorporate this type of work in my classroom and continue this type of work in my life.” A fellow classmate, Hannah, stated, “I can proudly say that by the end of the day I really felt like I achieved something big and great and it was nice I had my class and teacher to share it with.” Many students reported similar sentiments regarding the service project. Students shared in their letters that the project was not only enjoyable because they were doing it with friends and peers but also because they were doing their project for the betterment of a school to benefit high school students.

During class, students indicated that they were able to clearly relate the service implementation day to their developing identity as future teachers. One student, Elizabeth, was offended by the nature of instruction offered in the alternative high school. The school was project based so students spent little time at desks working on traditional reading and writing school tasks. Instead, students researched and implemented projects that were designed to meet high school outcome/standard requirements. A follow up discussion helped Elizabeth to understand that her negative feelings about the school were not a bad thing, but instead perhaps an indication that her future teaching environment best-fit would likely be a more traditional sort of school. Another student, Brian, later emailed the LC coordinator to share that the experience had completely changed his idea of where he wanted to teach: he had entered college planning to be a teacher in a more traditional sort of school, but after the project he knew he wanted to teach at an alternative high school. The statements from the students clearly show how this servant leadership project positively affected the students and was an educational and enjoyable experience.

### Discussion

The Servant Leadership course was again offered in the spring of 2012, 2013, 2014 and 2015. The course was made an official University of Wisconsin-Whitewater course (i.e., INTRAUNV 124 Service Learning and Leadership Seminar) in 2014. The course remains popular with class size increasing from year 1 to 2 and again between years 3 and 4 (See Table 2). The original survey data have not been collected since the first cohort of Together We Teach as it was determined to be too general for our purposes.

Table 2.

Learning Community Enrollment from Fall New Student Seminar (required) to Spring Service Learning & Leadership Seminar (optional)

Cohort	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
NSS enrollment fall	28	31	23	23	21
SLLS enrollment spring	17	23	16	17	15
Percent from Fall to Spring	61%	72%	70%	74%	71%

Data regarding GPA are available, and students in each cohort have been required to practice reflective writing throughout the course, including a letter to the instructor at the end of the course. These reflective writings consistently demonstrate that students highly value the course and believe its impact to be

important to their development as citizens and future teachers. Figure 1 provides a sampling of quotes from students in the original cohort regarding their perceptions of the common read (*Teach with Your Heart: Lessons I Learned from the Freedom Writers*, Gruwell, 2007) and the service activity with the urban school. We plan to write an article that will analyze longitudinal qualitative data gathered from the course's reflective activities, as well as survey responses of all cohorts.

I think the book related to our service project with the students from Loyola because there was a lot of diversity with the students. We also got to act like Erin in a way and help teach the students about working together to reach a common goal. The presentation we put on for the one class about Whitewater also gave them a chance to learn about college and how they can further their education to have a bright future.
My definition of a servant leader has changed many times throughout this class. Having read the book and done the service project, I think that determination is a major quality in a servant leader. Never giving up and doing everything to help others is what these individuals believe. They want to see others succeed and help make them strong leaders as well. Another quality of a servant leader is having passion for what they do and not looking to be rewarded.
Diversity is very important to me and I feel that all people need to experience different diverse environments to really develop as a person. These books helped open up my eyes to people accepting other people and make me want to be more open to accepting new people also. This book helped inspire our class to be more motivated in helping with a service project we took part in at a high school in Milwaukee. I feel that it made us all more open and excited to partake in the project, and helped our experience become one that seemed very successful. Talking about this book, and our perspective about this book, made for great class discussions and helped our group grow closer. I also felt that it helped us develop a bond because we all became more accepting of each other and all the people we encountered in our service project that we performed this year.
I liked how the book started a year before the movie did. The book also had a few more details and more things when they left high school. It was nice to read about her thoughts on everything because sometimes movies won't put everything in it. The book impacted our trip to the high school because it showed the different sides of things that some of us are not use to seeing. What makes a good teacher would be the teacher putting all their heart into the students and really caring.
I thought it was an amazing book that has impacted my life in a certain way. It has made me realize that not everyone starts out with everything. They work for it and hard. It is not just handed to them. Good things come to those who work hard. It has also made me want to get out there more and make people realize that racism is not something that should still be going on. It only hurts people in the end. The world is in color. The book has impacted our trip because it has made us realize that there are good things we can do to help, and helping people is only going to make us stronger as future teachers.
I also liked how in the book we were able to hear about some of her past students and what they went on to do after high school, and how they still kept coming back to see her and help her out and be a part of her life. This is what I would love to have in my students; students that stay a part of my life for a very long time and just knowing that I helped to make a difference in their lives.

Figure 1. Sample Student Reflections from First SLLS Cohort

Although the original project-related survey did not show statistically significant results, we concluded that the servant leadership course pilot was a success for the students. We based this conclusion on student feedback about the

course, on feedback from our partner school in Milwaukee in which we participate in service activities, and on the continued interest of incoming students to enroll in the course. The course continues to draw students each year and has evolved to include stronger co-curricular content. Learning community students involved in the first cohort of Service Learning and Leadership Seminar saw increased GPA and reported high regards towards volunteerism. Anecdotal reports from students indicated that they remained involved on campus and in the Whitewater community throughout their college experience. Together We Teach students from the 2010-2011 freshmen cohort have remained active on and off campus at UW-Whitewater. Many students went on to be peer mentors (for incoming freshmen) in the fall of 2011, many students worked on campus (e.g., as resident assistants, as assistant teachers in the campus preschool) or in the community (e.g., nursing home). Several students from this cohort maintained connections with the coordinator and have engaged in undergraduate research activities and presentations at national conferences related to this work. In addition, students report being highly involved in clubs, organizations, and sports.

As indicated above, the service leadership course was made a regular course offering beginning in spring of 2014. The one credit Service Learning and Leadership Seminar (INTRAUNV 124) is now being offered to multiple freshman learning communities across campus as a second semester offering. Nine sections ran in spring of 2014 and eight in 2015. As part of the Liberal Education America's Promise (LEAP) initiative at UWW, a pre and post survey is a required part of the course. The survey items are based on the AACU Value Rubrics (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.) and focus on LEAP Essential Learning Outcomes (ELO), specifically leadership and civic engagement. Figure 1 provides a snapshot of the survey items. Data from this survey will be used to assess how the course raised student awareness of their own development of ELO, Leadership Attributes and Civic Engagement, and will be reported in a forthcoming paper.

*Figure 2. Questions in Pre/Post LEAP Survey*

The definition of Civic Engagement is “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make that difference. It means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes.” (AACU, 2007)

1. Have you been involved with civic engagement prior to this class?  
Yes or No
2. If you answered yes, please list the activities that you have participated in that you believe qualify as civic engagement.
3. If you answer yes, did you learn from the experience(s)?
4. If yes, please explain what you learned
5. Have these prior experiences influenced you to seek out more civic engagement opportunities?
6. Please rank your awareness (not aware/aware/very aware) in the following areas:
  - a. Your attitude and beliefs are different from those of other cultures and communities.
  - b. How your current field of study is related to your own participation in civic life, politics, and government
  - c. Reflecting and acknowledging what you have learned
  - d. Expressing, listening, and adapting ideas and messages based on others' perspectives
  - e. Identifying ways to participate in civic contexts

### **Implications & Future Directions**

Freshman year of college is an optimal time for service learning. Kuh (2008) strongly suggests that to raise achievement in college all students should participate in at least two HIP, one in their first year and one later in their major program. The related benefits to many of the HIP include purposeful time on a specific task, increased faculty and peer communication that are also task specific, increased exposure to diversity, increased feedback from faculty, opportunities to see the effects of learning across content and experience, and finally, the opportunity to grow self-awareness and direction through experience. Many experts posit that the combined use of multiple high-impact practices stands to offer even greater student outcomes for all students (Seifert, Pascarella, Goodman, Salisbury, & Blaich, 2010). Brownell & Swaner (2010) put forward a call for increased integration of HIP arguing that, “By being intentional about these linkages, colleges and universities can provide more opportunities for students to apply their learning to new contexts and to develop strong communities in and out of the classroom (p. 43)”.

Of the ten identified LEAP HIP, six are readily available for first year student experiences. These six are:

1. First year seminars and experiences
2. Common intellectual experiences
3. Learning communities
4. Collaborative assignments and projects
5. Diversity/global learning
6. Service learning and community-based learning

The remaining four HIP—writing intensive courses, undergraduate research, internships, and capstone courses and projects—might be more readily accessed by students engaging in two or more of the first six. As mentioned above, students from the first few years of the service learning and leadership seminar went on to participate in undergraduate research with the coordinator of the learning community. Future research might consider the relationship between both number and type of HIP and when students engage in these practices during college and beyond.

While this project demonstrated the use of multiple (five) HIP with a freshman cohort, it lacked comprehensive and targeted assessment of its impact. Furthermore, additional linkages may have strengthened outcomes. For instance, students might have been able to more effectively connect course material from fall to spring if they had participated in a shared field trip during fall semester that exposed them earlier to a diversity experience related to the spring service learning class. Likewise, a collaborative assignment with content from the linked courses may have also strengthened the student experience, and could have brought in the HIP related to writing-intensive courses. Indeed, since this first service learning and leadership experience, additional linking elements, such as those mentioned here, have been added. Finally, students were asked to reflect on their spring service learning experience, but it might have been a helpful addition to the freshman year to have had them reflect on their own learning with multiple and integrated HIP across semesters

Future work in this area will utilize on-line surveys with larger sample size for the intervention group and comparison groups, additional instrumentation for measuring student attitudes and perceptions, and increased longitudinal data collection to consider long-range effects of student involvement.

Service learning is an increasingly common offering in higher education. The connections to communities can be established and providing students with real life experiences is generally considered a positive thing. However, as Novak, Markey & Allen (2007) point out, the goal of service learning should not be simply to create an event for students. Future work in this area should define varieties and elements of service learning in order to determine best practice and to link best practice to tangible student outcomes. As noted earlier, since this

project was completed, a course has been developed and implemented as a first year offering that combines service learning with leadership development. This new course introduces students to basic concepts of leadership, to application of leadership and problem solving skills in fund raising, and to the experience of following through with a real life service project in a diverse educational setting. While this is a short-term service learning experience for the students involved, it may lay the foundation for continued service learning (Delve, Mintz, & Stewart, 1990).

McCarthy (1996) identifies elements of effective short-term service experiences that spur students toward making future connections between experience and action. These include experiences that require students to associate a name/face to social concerns or issues and motivate them to make a difference, and that engages them in assignments specific to a related class, meaningful service activities, and opportunity for reflection. The service learning and leadership seminar that emerged from this project includes all of these elements, and is made even stronger as it is directly tied to the major of the students who take the class. In the future, we plant to strengthen the first year, multi-HIP model that is already in place by including an integrated assignment in the fall semester that will begin to prepare students for their spring service experience while developing their writing and research skills.

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