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Developing First-Year University Student Leadership: Leadership Development In A Short Term Service-Learning Program

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The author examines the impact of participation in a service-learning program involving two small groups of freshmen at Saginaw Valley State University, a mid-sized public university in Michigan, on leadership activities in years following this first year experience. Based on a review of student reflection papers and a survey conducted after the program concluded, the author explores whether the service-learning program influenced how students conceptualized leadership and leadership activities. Even though leadership development was not explicitly part of the program, students indicated that the program did enhance their ability to serve as leaders in other areas. While the number of students participating in the program described is relatively small (N=45), the results indicate that this short, intense service-learning program did shape students' conceptualizations of leadership as well as how they participated as leaders in other areas.

Keywords: Service-learning, Higher education, Leadership

While higher education in the United States has a long history of community engagement, ranging from the mission of land grant universities and extension agencies to the promotion of volunteerism among students, for the past quarter century or more there has been a growth in interest in linking higher education to communities. This growing interest was manifest in the membership in Campus Compact (a national coalition of universities committed to civic engagement) which began with three colleges in 1985 and was part of over 1,100 campuses in 2015. This was also evident in the development of the Carnegie Classification on Community Engagement, which was first offered in 2006, and recognized universities that had a high degree of involvement in their communities. In 2015, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching selected 240 U.S. colleges and universities to receive this classification.

One critical component of this new wave of community engagement in higher education has been service-learning. Service-learning is a pedagogy that deliberately links student learning with community service in a manner that enhances student learning while providing a service to an organization or group within the community. According to Jacoby and Associates (1996), "Service-learning is 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" (p. 5). Service-learning is distinguished from volunteering by the inclusion of clear learning outcomes and direct linkages to class content.

While service-learning can take a wide variety of forms, the purpose of this paper is to explore the linkages between service-learning and leadership by examining a one-year service-learning program operating in a mid-sized Midwestern American public university. Through examination of survey results and qualitative thematic analysis of student reflection

papers, the author explores how participation in service-projects has impacted students' self-reported roles as leaders after conclusion of the program. In this case, we draw from the definition by Northouse (2013) which states that "Leadership is a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (p. 5). However, the research relies on students to self-identify themselves as leaders rather than imposing a definition upon them. While the small size of the program limits the generalizability of any conclusions from this study, it nonetheless helps shed light on the relationship between service-learning and leadership.

Literature Review

At this stage, there is a great deal of research supporting service-learning as a tool to benefit students. The benefits have ranged from enhanced student learning (e.g. Astin & Sax 1998, Eyler, Root, & Giles Jr, 1998, & Strage, 2000), career development (Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000), and enhanced student satisfaction (Astin & Sax, 1998). While leadership has not always a dominant theme in the service-learning movement, it has been a part of service-learning programs going back to the early stages of the movement. For example, Scheuerman (1996) provided several examples of university service-learning co-curricular programs around the country that have a leadership component. Similarly, Enos and Throppe (1996) highlighted programs relating leadership and service-learning in the curriculum. Leadership also appeared as a component in recent program models, such as the Civic-Minded Graduate (Steinberg, Hatcher, & Bringle, 2011) and undergraduate leadership development have been shown to play a key role in sustaining some service-learning programs (e.g. Chesler, Kellman-Fritz, & Knife-Gould 2003). The Social Change Model of Leadership Development (Komives & Wagner, 2009) has influenced many, although not all, of the programs described, which highlights the connection between leadership and service-learning.

Research into the links between service-learning and leadership are not new. Leadership has been a dependent variable in studies back in the 1990s and likely before (e.g. Giles & Eyler, 1994). In some cases, research into leadership development and service-learning has been discipline specific. For example, a study by Groh, Stallwood, and Daniels (2011) demonstrated how service-learning facilitated the development of leadership skills in nursing students. Similarly, Newman, Bruyere, and Beh (2007) found that service-learning was an effective means to enhance student leadership qualities in the field of natural resource management.

At the national level, there is significant evidence of a linkage between service-learning and leadership skills. For instance, Eyler and Giles (1999) surveyed over 2,500 college and university students in their national study of service-learning. Utilizing a leadership scale that included elements such as leading groups, knowing whom to contact for information, developing the ability to take action, and being effective in accomplishing goals, they identified a statistically significant correlation between service-learning and leadership skills development. Qualitative results from this study also supported the linkage and the authors quote several students in support of the relationship between leadership and service-learning.

In 2000, Vogelgesang and Astin published the results of a 22,000 student quantitative, longitudinal national study. Again, these authors found statistically significant relationships between service-learning and leadership abilities, leadership activities, and interpersonal

skills. The Vogelgesang and Austin research is particularly interesting, however, because they also found that the influence of service-learning on leadership development in all three areas (ability, activity, and interpersonal skills) did not exceed the influence of participating in generic volunteer activities. In other words, the service component of service-learning is possibly playing a greater role in terms of leadership development than the structured learning and/or self-reflection.

Despite research linking service-learning to leadership, some scholars such as Zlotkowski, Horowitz, and Benson (2011) have suggested that leadership has played a secondary role to other learning outcomes. In other words, they suggest that while leadership may not be a new consideration in the service-learning movement or in service-learning research, it has not always been a primary one. The authors note that, perhaps for understandable reasons, emphasis in service-learning has until this point privileged student learning as it relates directly to curriculum and/or community impact. With the exception of the admittedly growing number of student leadership programs, leadership is not an explicit part of student learning.

Butin (2005) offered a similar critique of current trends in service-learning. He commented on the privileging of what he refers to as the cultural and political dimensions of service-learning. According to Butin, the cultural dimension refers to the promotion of values such as diversity and citizenship while the political dimension refers to efforts to promote social change and address issues of community inequality. In many ways, Butin's political dimension reflects the comments by Zlotkowski et al. (2011) regarding the service emphasis of many service-learning programs while his cultural dimension is similar to either primary or secondary learning objectives.

Butin's (2005) conclusions are a little different than Zlotkowski et al. (2011), however, in that he advocated for a post-modern disruption of power relationships and the artificial linearity of typical classes through service-learning. He suggested that "Academic subjects are inherently messy; our attempts to, for example, fashion linear and chronological syllabi around particular themes and topics is but the chimera of order overlaying the turbulence and turmoil of lived realities" (Butin, 2005, p. 98). On the other hand, service-learning "is a pedagogy immersed in the complexities and ambiguities of how we come to make sense of ourselves and the world around us" (p. 98). As many service-learning practitioners would agree, service-learning creates a means for students to immerse themselves in those complexities and ambiguities. Certainly compared to a lecture-based classroom, service-learning projects provide a much different and often unpredictable set of challenges to students.

This has real implications for leadership since leadership, as with service-learning, requires students to struggle with those ambiguities and complexities. Zlotkowski et al. (2011) suggested that "the time may now be ripe to begin paying much more attention to this 'secondary' issue" (p. 51) and perhaps Butin would agree that making leadership a more pronounced part of service-learning has the potential to highlight the post-modern dimension of service-learning. Butin commented that students "must embrace, whether consciously or not, the actions within the experience because they are actors within it" (p. 101, 2005). This should involve immersing themselves in an understanding of their decision to become, or not to become, leaders in their classes or communities. In other words, service-learning has the potential to influence whether students describe themselves as leaders.

For these reasons, it is useful to explore how leadership may be related to service-learning. In this particular study, the research question is whether students will describe themselves as leaders or describe the program as impacting their leadership activities even though leadership goals were not presented to the students. In other words, will the structure of the program itself stimulate leadership activities and/or abilities despite the fact that it was not explicitly a learning objective of the program? This paper will, at least briefly, examine how students construct the concept and meaning of leadership in the context of the program.

Program Organization

The Saginaw Valley State University, which operates the service-learning program examined in this paper, is a regional public university of approximately 10,000 students. The Foundation Scholars Service-Learning Corps is organized into a year-long program that culminates in a three week service-learning class. Students are initially recruited during their senior year of high school and must apply and go through an interview process before being accepted into the program. Anecdotally, it appears that most students are drawn to the program due to the prestige and the priority registration that students in the program receive. Students in the program who live on campus are also housed together and all students have the opportunity to take specially designated Foundation Scholars classes that are typically smaller and more rigorous than typical classes.

Due to changes in available funding there was a decrease in participants in the first and second year of the program. The first year the program operated, which was 2011, there were 34 students. In the second year there were 14 students and in the third year there are 12 students. In each year, there has been significant female participation in the program with approximately 80% of the program consisting of women in each year. In orientation sessions prior to the start of the program, many students indicated that they were interested in the program due to a background in service and volunteer activities and a desire to continue those activities in college.

In the fall of their first year, Service-Learning Corps students met to discuss the format of the program and begin to think about potential service projects. Program leaders emphasized to students that they would have a primary role in deciding the content of the project as well as implementing the project itself. The only parameters that were placed on projects were that (a) they must incorporate a community/partner that is a non-profit organization, (b) the project must be completed by the end of the three week project period in May of the following year, and (c) the project must meet the budget limitations of the program. In this brainstorming phase, students typically had only general ideas as to what sorts of projects they would like to work on. For instance, students considered organizing a 5k race as a fundraiser or creating a garden for a homeless shelter. They were understandably busy in their first semester at the university and their ideas were usually vague and loosely defined. While most students were living together in the same housing unit, many of them are not in the same classes.

As they entered their second semester, all students were required to sign up for SOC111: Introduction to Sociology (3 credits) and SOC190: Service-Learning Project Planning (1 credit.) SOC111 served as the academic basis for the class where students engaged in a survey of basic sociological concepts and overview of the structure and organization of society. Importantly, students also examined a variety of social problems and issues with

an eye to how they might use their service-learning projects to address these problems or issues. For instance, poverty is a topic discussed at several points in the SOC111 class and formed the basis for discussion about projects that could help address problems related to poverty.

SOC190 was where students learned the specific elements of project planning and implementation and also met with a variety of community groups. The learning objectives of this class included grant writing, budget development, timeline development, and professional communication with community partners. The class culminated in the development of a grant proposal and presentation created by groups of two to five students. The proposals were the students' opportunity to demonstrate that they had developed a feasible project that would be beneficial to their community partner within the parameters of the program. While program leaders reserve the right to refuse funding for projects, by keeping close communication with student groups potential problems with timeframe, budget, or other issues have always been addressed prior to finalizing project proposals.

As part of the program, students were given free university housing as well as a food stipend for a three-week period after the conclusion of the winter semester (in May of each year). During these three weeks students were expected to dedicate a substantial amount of their time to completing their projects. Students also attended a series of classes about social change and the role of groups and individuals in enacting broader social change. These classes served as the academic component of the projects and also provided important opportunities for the program leader to help students through the various challenges that arose as students went into the field to complete their projects.

In 2011 and 2012, a total of twelve service-learning projects were implemented. The projects themselves have ranged significantly and included gardens and playgrounds for schools and childcare programs, a picnic shelter, a set of community focus groups, and assistance with renovations for a homeless shelter, food pantry, and after-school music program. With only two exceptions, the community partners that student groups have worked with were previously identified by program leaders. While there were challenges associated with all of the projects, ranging from weather and difficulty accessing work sites to budget errors and construction problems, all projects were successfully implemented in both years assessed in this paper.

Methods

In order to assess the impact of the program on students, two methods were used. The first consisted of thematic, qualitative analysis of the reflection papers that students wrote at the conclusion of the three week program. In both years, students were asked to describe what they learned as a result of participating in the program. Since the program is relatively small (48 students), an initial review of reflection papers was used to identify general themes addressed by students. This was followed by developing a matrix of dominant learning themes that students brought up in their papers that was applied to all reflection papers. Emergent themes included leadership, small-group management, diversity, project impact, and personal growth.

Since one of the goals of this program was to impact students after the program had concluded, a follow-up survey was also conducted of all students who participated in the program in 2011 and 2012. This survey, which was conducted in January of 2013, was done as an anonymous, Internet-based survey. Students were contacted through email and

through the program Facebook site. Two email contacts were made requesting that students take the survey. In order to increase response rates, the survey was kept short and limited to 10 questions, 9 multiple-choice and 1 open-ended. Students were asked which year they completed the program, to self-report their gender, whether they had taken a leadership role after the program, and then a series of questions about the impact of the program on students' participation in leadership activities. The institutional review board at the university granted approval for analysis of both reflection papers and survey results.

The response rate was 75% (N=36) with participants in the 2012 class responding at a slightly higher rate (79%, N=12) than those who were in the program in 2011 (67%, N=24.) Seventeen percent of the respondents were male, which is very close to the proportion of males that were part of the program (19%). This suggests that survey respondents are closely representative of the program participants for the years assessed.

Results

Fifty percent of the respondents indicated that they had assumed either a formal or informal leadership position after completing the program. Eighty-eight percent of the survey respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that participating in the program made them a better leader (Table 1). This was relatively consistent with student responses to similar questions with 75.3% indicating they had a positive learning experience, 94.5% indicating they felt better prepared to work with groups, 100% felt better able to organize a service project, and 88.9% more aware of regional organizations. Interestingly, only 69.4% indicated that they felt the program encouraged them to engage in other service activities.

A desirability effect may have influenced student responses as, in response to a question about assuming future leadership positions, only 50% of respondents indicated they were serving in either formal or informal leadership positions. Notably, at the time the survey was conducted, these students were only in their second or third years at the university so it is possible that this number would increase as the cohorts enter their junior and senior years. At least anecdotally, leadership positions at university organizations, such as co-curricular student groups or student government, are typically held by juniors and seniors.

As part of the survey, students who had assumed leadership positions were also asked an open-ended question regarding the influence of the service-learning program on both their decision to assume a leadership position as well as their approach to leadership. Sixteen students responded to the open-ended question. The majority of responses were positive and many indicated the program had influenced both the decision to be a leader and how the student acted in the position. For example, one respondent stated that

Before I got involved in the Foundation Scholars Service-Learning Program, I always took a step back when I was volunteering. I never stood up and wanted to be the leader. But now I know how to lead efficiently and I know how to work with others in a much smoother fashion.

In fact seven of the respondents indicated heightened confidence as leaders as a result of participation in the program.

Notably, however, some responses indicated that the program had little to no influence on their decision to lead even though it may have influenced how they led. As one respondent indicated "[I] wouldn't say the Foundation Scholars Service-Learning Program influenced my DECISION to become a leader... It did help my approach to leadership by giving me

more experience with working in diverse groups and settings to accomplish a specific goal.” Another respondent noted that “I feel that I learned much better how to work in a team and how to organize a project. However, my experience did not influence my decision to become a leader.”

Table 1
Self-reported student learning from service-learning program

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree	No answer
Participating in the SVSU Foundation Scholars Program was a positive learning experience.	56% (N=28)	19.4% (N=7)	2.8% (N=1)	0	0	0
Participating in the SVSU Foundation Scholars Program helped prepare me to work with groups of people.	55.6% (N=20)	38.9% (N=14)	5.6% (N=2)	0	0	0
Participating in the SVSU Foundation Scholars Program helped prepare me to be a better leader.	44.4% (N=16)	44.4% (N=16)	11.1% (N=4)	0	0	0
Participating in the SVSU Foundation Scholars Program taught me how to organize and implement a service project.	75.0% (N=27)	25.0% (N=9)	0	0	0	0
Participating in the SVSU Foundation Scholars Program made me more aware of other organizations in the Great Lakes Bay Region.	41.7% (N=15)	47.2% (N=17)	8.3% (N=3)	2.8% (N=1)	0	0
Participating in the SVSU Foundation Scholars Program encouraged me to engage in other service activities (e.g. volunteering, participating in other student organizations, etc.)	25.0% (N=9)	44.4% (N=16)	25.0% (N=9)	5.6% (N=2)	0	0

At least one respondent did not feel that the program effectively shaped either his/her leadership interest or skills. This respondent noted that “I honestly believe that the scholars program had little to do with my leadership experience. I have always been a leader but I felt that the short time we had in the program was not effective.” This idea that leadership interest preceded participation in the program was reflected in the comments of another student who noted that “my passion for leading and influencing others has been with me for some time.”

In contrast to the survey results, leadership was not a significant theme in the reflection papers. In fact, in response to a question requiring students to list what they learned in the program only nine students indicated leadership skills. That is only 20% of the 45 student reflection papers that were analyzed. Despite this low number, comments were generally very positive. One student wrote “I also think I have also grown as a leader and can now

much more effectively manage a group to get a task done” while another reflected that “At the end of this project, I can say that I have learned what type of leader I am.” Student reflections about leadership were generally not lengthy or very analytical, which is to be expected since the program was not explicitly about leadership and, as first year students, this was meant to only give them early exposure to service projects. This seemed to be the case for one student who described getting a “sense of leadership” through the program. This student noted “I have gained a sense of leadership. After months planning this project, I have learned to not only voice my opinion on matters, but also help lead a group to figure out a more organized plan of action.”

While not directly related to leadership, one important leadership skill made a very strong appearance in many reflection papers and emerged as the most notable theme among the 45 papers reviewed. In 29 papers (64%) students mentioned the issue of learning to work effectively with a small group of people. In a few cases, comments about group management overlapped with the leadership theme. This was the case for the student who stated

I have grown personally by understanding that I do not always have to have a ‘leadership’ role in a group setting. In certain situations it is better to be a follower instead of blindly leading the group because you were too proud and arrogant to admit that you do not know what you are doing.

In other cases, the importance of learning to work as a group was not related to leadership as one student stated simply “Throughout the course of the project, it became very evident how much team work comes into action. Without working together on every aspect of the project, our project would not have been completed.” Needless to say, learning to work as a team was not always an easy task and some students indicated frustration with other group members, “Even though my group members were helpful, they weren’t as fast-paced and efficient as myself in completing certain tasks.”

Discussion

As previously noted by Zlotkowski et al (2011), service-learning programs have a history of emphasizing learning and community impact and topics such as leadership have taken a secondary role, at best. In many ways, the program described in this paper has a similar framework. Leadership was not an explicit part of program objectives and was not talked about when students were recruited or the program was marketed. Even as students were asked to reflect about the various stages of their service-learning projects, leadership was, at best, only briefly mentioned. In fact, only 50% of the survey respondents indicated that they have assumed leadership positions after the program.

Of course, as several student comments suggest, this does not mean that this program was itself the causative factor when it came to student leadership interest. After all, many students entered the program with previous leadership experience and interest. Nonetheless, even if this program did not necessarily influence student decision to participate in leadership activities in the one or two years after the program, the data suggests that the program still facilitated student learning about leadership. In other words, it may have helped current students interested in leadership become better leaders. This was explicitly the case in the nine reflection papers where leadership was mentioned (e.g. “The second thing I gained was leadership and responsibility skills. I was the group member who set up most of the meetings, managed our budget, and kept things on schedule.”) This also

seemed to be reflected in the survey where 88.8% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with a statement that the program helped prepare them to be better leaders.

An additional limit of this study is that there is no control group. This is notable since it is unclear if the benefits that students report in regards to leadership skills are superior to those that may have been gained by generic volunteer experience. Vogelgesang and Astin (2000) found that while service-learning may enhance leadership ability, involvement, and self-perceived growth it does not do so in a manner superior to generic volunteer activity. While the impact on leadership may be similar to that of standard volunteer activities, anecdotal discussions with students suggest that service-learning programs have one benefit over volunteer activities. They make it easier for students to manage time. As they negotiate work, school, family, friends, volunteering, and other commitments integrating service activities into course work can make it easier for students to engage in school work and volunteer activities at the same time.

Conclusion

Despite the limits of this study, both survey data and thematic analysis suggest that there is a link between leadership and service-learning. Due to the structure of the program and the type of students that were recruited and selected, the program appeared to have little, if any, influence on students' decision to participate in leadership positions. Nonetheless, students appeared to be more confident, comfortable, and to have enhanced some important leadership skills as a result of participating in the program. Even vacant structured discussion or lectures about definitions of leadership, many students felt better about taking on leadership roles.

Student construction of the concept of leadership was difficult to pull from either from the survey or analysis of reflection papers. Still, the emphasis on small group interaction was notable and surprisingly pronounced. In some cases students indicated that they made conscious decisions not to act a leader. One student stated "The most important insight that I gained as our project progress is that I don't always have to be the leader." Another student wrote "In certain situations it is better to be a follower instead of blindly leading the group because you were too proud and arrogant to admit that you do not know what you are doing." Of course, some students came to opposite conclusions and one student noted "The lesson was that even though you may not want to be the boss, sometimes you have to be to get the project done. Going into this project during the winter semester, I felt like I was the leader of the group and in charge because my other group members did not step up to the plate."

In each of the above examples, we have students who are reflecting upon leadership, not in terms of a specific set of skills or attributes, but rather in the specific context of the other students in the group as well as the goals of the service project at hand. In each case, the students weighed their own attributes against those of other members of their group as they pertained to the task. This requires an understanding of leadership as an embodied process rather than a value (good leadership versus bad leadership) vacant context. These students were at least moving towards a post-modern understanding of leadership and service-learning.

While it was an admittedly small group of students who illustrated this reflection on leadership, it nonetheless speaks to the potential of Butin's assessment of service-learning as a post-modern practice (2005). Butin stated that "Service-learning is a fundamentally

embodied process. As such, students cannot simply engage in an intellectual exercise. They must embrace, whether consciously or not, the actions within the experience because they are actors within it” (p. 101). In Butin’s conceptualization of service-learning, leadership cannot be seen as a simple set of generic skills vacant context, but rather as a set of skills and practices that can only be understood and evaluated within the context of the group and project. Unfortunately, it is these post-modern leadership practices that are more difficult to detect with a survey or even analysis of reflection papers.

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