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Leadership Development through Service-Learning: My Drake Experience

Introduction

Drake University's mission statement is to provide students an exceptional learning environment that prepares students for meaningful personal lives, professional accomplishments, and responsible global citizenship. The Drake experience is distinguished by collaborative learning among students, faculty, and staff and by the integration of the liberal arts and sciences with professional preparation. Service-learning opportunities at Drake provide meaningful and unique learning experience where students engage with the Des Moines community by partnering with local organizations or schools, such as, I Have A Dream Foundation, the Des Moines Bike Collective, or Ruby Van Meter School. Students who have actively participated in these service-learning projects build competence, confidence, and develop leadership skills that can be used in academic, professional, and personal settings.

A First Year Seminar Learning Partnership

A First-Year Seminar Course (FYS) that is offered at Drake University focuses on eliminating the stigmatization of intellectual and developmental disabilities through interactive and community based learning. This course not only engages students in gaining a better understanding of these conditions through discussions, lectures, and required readings, but also allows students to dispel the myths of these diagnoses through focused service-learning experiences. A Drake faculty member coordinates the variety of visits and activities that allow students in this course to partner with Ruby Van Meter (RVM), a Des Moines public school that assists more than 175 special education students, aged 12 to 21 years old. I worked with Anisa Fornoff, Associate Professor of Pharmacy Practice. The partnership between Ruby Van Meter and Drake University continues to be a growing relationship that allows students from Ruby Van Meter to facilitate communication and have meaningful interactions with non-disabled peers. Throughout the fall semester, students partnered with a RVM teacher to assist and participate directly in classroom activities. Specific objectives of this

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experience were as follows: 1) to critically apply coursework and applied learning experience to enrich classroom discussions, 2) facilitate understanding of individuals with disabilities, and 3) encourage communication and interaction with persons with disabilities. In addition to regularly scheduled visits, the Drake students organized, secured funding for, and volunteered at a carnival during RVM's homecoming week.

Beyond the coursework, which included reading and learning about various intellectual and developmental disabilities, the biggest takeaway for first-year students in this class was planning and organizing the homecoming carnival, which was held at Ruby Van Meter School. This carnival featured a variety of activities, including a duck derby, prize walk, face painting, beanbag toss, and "Whip-It", where RVM students were able to throw whip cream pies in Drake students' faces.

From previously being a student in this FYS, I continued my leadership development by taking on the role of planner for this event. I truly wanted to impact the education of the first-year students at Drake by helping them to gain a better understanding of these disabilities along with advocating the importance of helping individuals with disabilities both inside and outside of the Des Moines community. The most integral aspect of planning this event was writing a grant application through the Community Engagement and Service-Learning office of the Provost at Drake University. This would help with hosting the carnival at RVM as well as planning activities that would be all inclusive to the students of Ruby Van Meter. Every student should have the opportunity to participate in all activities, requiring careful thought to accommodations such as dietary restrictions and mobility issues. All of these accommodations were integral in ensuring a successful carnival experience for each student. The grant was important as it provided funding for the numerous games and activities that students would enjoy in a safe environment while providing prizes for participating in these games. Ruby Van Meter students benefit from this extravagant carnival by having positive interactions with non-disabled peers. The Des Moines community has limited opportunities in which Drake students can walk to and actively engage with individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities. This opportunity allowed Drake students to be active members in promoting awareness and inclusiveness for individuals with disabilities. Not only did this experience have a significant impact on the students' lives, this yearly event continually makes an impact on the teachers and staff at Ruby Van Meter. Every year, the director and teachers are tremendously grateful for support in hosting the homecoming carnival for students.

Bringing in New Perspectives about Service Learning

Providing the opportunity to participate in the Ruby Van Meter Homecoming Carnival allows Drake students to consider new perspectives and participate in important conversations

advocating for disability awareness in the community. Additionally, participation in the Ruby Van Meter Homecoming carnival provides a platform for Drake students to consider the ability levels of Ruby Van Meter students and work to accommodate all of the individuals in the homecoming carnival. "Without this hands-on learning experience, we would not have been able to connect with the Ruby Van Meter students and really understand that individuals with disabilities are the same as you or me," a former FYS student states. "Without a doubt, I would say that this FYS has helped me and the other students grow and evaluate the way we treat others." I personally echo these thoughts, when I was in the FYS throughout the course of the semester; my views regarding developmental and intellectual disabilities changed and I have an entirely new perspective. The importance of service-learning learning in colleges and universities is uniquely important because it develops and prepares responsible citizens, rather than educating students in the classical education environment. An important aspect of service-learning that allows individuals to make their experiences personal and meaningful is reflection. Alongside planning the homecoming carnival, students in the FYS also complete four to five 90-minute visits throughout the semester that enabled them to have more one-on-one interactions with students at RVM. After each session students were encouraged to reflect upon their experiences, in any way they would like to express themselves through a biweekly journal, and this allowed them to analyze at the end of the semester how their perspective(s) changed from their initial visit. These reflection activities provide the bridge between the community service activities and the educational content of the course. By actively partaking in reflection, these activities also direct the student's attention to various, innovative interpretations of events. Reflecting also offers a means through which the community component can be studied and analyzed, similarly to a standard textbook which is used in the traditional academic setting. Reflection is viewed as one of the most critical and effective methods to provide the most out of one's service-learning experience.

Leadership Education at Drake University

Not only have I been able to learn through a service-learning activity, I have declared a leadership concentration along with my pharmacy degree. At Drake, students from a variety of academic disciplines can also engage with the Des Moines community by declaring a LEAD (Leadership Education and Development) concentration. This allows students to work with various non-profit organizations in hands-on service-learning projects to inspire and create a community beyond the campus itself. Students who pursue this concentration learn through interactive classes and application of skills they develop in the community. The foundations of coursework are built around the book titled *The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership* by James Kouzes and Barry Posner. Building off of these practices, students learn about the theory of leadership and about themselves as a leader with concepts such as emotional intelligence and

the various personality profiles. As students progress through the coursework, they will then learn about the Vision, Alignment, and Execution model and the overall work of leaders in a team setting.

As a developing student leader at Drake University, reflecting upon my leadership development is a vital component to expressing my strengths and discovering new strategies to overcome my weaknesses. Through my leadership concentration, I have been able to further explore a different perspective in leading, servant leadership. This past summer, I received the opportunity to travel abroad to Punta Gorda, Belize to complete my international capstone experience with a nongovernmental organization called TIDE (Toledo Institute of Development and Ecology). During my six week capstone experience, I worked along with two other students researching herbal/medicinal remedies through personal interviews to create a small booklet for the community members of the Toledo district based upon the five distinct cultures of Belize: Garifuna, Maya, Mestizo, Creole, and East Indian. After completing this booklet, we distributed various copies to the community of Punta Gorda to access readily. The goal of this project was to not only create a resource that could bring a range of knowledge to benefit all, but to preserve the unique and traditional cultures that Belize has to offer.

The importance of leadership development can be related to any career that one may pursue, particularly the healthcare field. As a future pharmacist, valuing teamwork plays an integral role in providing the best outcome for patient care when working with a multi-disciplinary team. With my continuing leadership experience and knowledge, I would like to fulfill my aspirations as a future practitioner within the pharmacy profession by learning how to create dynamic change in the healthcare field in order to maximize patient outcomes.

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