

October 2017

## How Service Learning Inspired Student Leadership and Sustained Global Engagement

Caroline Olsen  
*Northwestern University*

Danielle Elliott  
*Northwestern University*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://opus.govst.edu/iujsl>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Service Learning Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Olsen, Caroline and Elliott, Danielle (2017) "How Service Learning Inspired Student Leadership and Sustained Global Engagement," *The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change*: Vol. 7: Iss. 1, p. 21-33.  
Available at: <http://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol7/iss1/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by OPUS Open Portal to University Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change by an authorized editor of OPUS Open Portal to University Scholarship. For more information, please contact [opus@govst.edu](mailto:opus@govst.edu).

## How Service Learning Inspired Student Leadership and Sustained Global Engagement

GESI Partner Organization: Foundation for Sustainable Development  
Community Partners: Fundación Enseñarte and CEDESOL (Centro de Desarrollo en Energía Solar)



*GESI Bolivia cohort, summer 2015*

Cochabamba, Bolivia

-21-

***Journal for Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change Fall 2017***

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the summer of 2015, Danielle Elliott and Caroline Olsen, two Journalism students finishing their second year at Northwestern, participated in the Global Engagement Studies Institute (GESI) where they lived in Cochabamba, Bolivia, for two months. GESI is a service-learning program in which students learn the foundation of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) and intern at an NGO abroad. The two-month summer GESI program begins with a week of pre-departure classes where the majority of the theoretical framework for ABCD is provided and the in-country internship groups are established. A seven-week in-country immersion follows. During this time, students write weekly reflections on loosely-structured topics, primarily focused around understanding the other and self. The course requirements during this time are meant to align with the NGO work that students perform in order to deepen their immersion, rather than pull them away. All students return to Chicago for a three day final summit where they learn the tools to discuss their experiences with others, reflect on how they developed, and are given opportunities to remain locally and globally engaged moving forward.

Danielle chose to do GESI because she wanted to improve her Spanish and learn more about working at an education-based NGO in a new community. She interned at Fundación Enseñarte, an after-school program for children ages 6-16 that encourages social and emotional development through an arts education and supplementary schooling. Part of the arts education is a circus program where the children receive technical training for a specific skill and then perform all together at a community gathering once a month. Caroline was attracted to the GESI program for its immersive nature. She wanted to practice her Spanish and live in a community where she would be able to make local friends and connections. She didn't realize how much the experience would affect her journalism career and the development of her personal journalistic

---

**Caroline Olsen** is a graduating senior from Northwestern studying Journalism and Asian American Studies. She hopes to use her degree to tell stories that expand cross-cultural understanding and inspire change. She is currently working on her first documentary about a band of undocumented immigrants from the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago, and looks forward to continuing this type of work. **Danielle Elliott** graduated from Northwestern University with a double major in journalism and political science and a minor in Spanish. She received a Fulbright grant and will be moving to Madrid, Spain, in September to work at the Universidad Camilo José Cela as an English Teaching Assistant. She will be working in the courses related to Communication, Globalization and Education.

ethics. Caroline interned at CEDESOL (Centro de Desarrollo en Energía Solar), an organization that combats indoor air pollution by supplying ecological cookers to families and schools in rural areas of Bolivia. Both the ABCD framework and the structure of GESI functioned together to engage Caroline and Danielle in transformative service learning through the presence of the other, reflective discourse, a mentoring community, and opportunities for committed action (Daloz, 2000). Emboldened by the beginning of a transformation, GESI served as a launching point for Caroline and Danielle to continue their transformative learning after the program ended by staying connected with the facilitating organization, the Buffett Institute for Global Studies, and by developing as leaders in their own communities and in the Buffett Fellowship program.

### **Service-Learning Through GESI**

Laurent A. Parks Daloz's "Conditions for Transformative Learning" articulates the reasons why GESI had such a powerful effect on Danielle and Caroline's transformation and leadership development (2000). Daloz mentions four conditions under which transformative learning might lead to greater social responsibility: presence of the other, reflective discourse, mentoring community, and opportunities for committed action.

#### **A. Presence of the Other**

The first of these conditions is "the presence of the other," in which the encounter challenges an earlier assumption of a boundary between "us" and "them" (Daloz, 2000). There are plenty of encounters with the other during GESI by nature of the program placing students in a foreign country; however, these encounters become even more meaningful and personal through student placements with host families and the development of local friendships through employment at an NGO. The previously established connections with fellow GESI students and staff allow the new GESI participants to challenge their assumptions, acknowledge differences between themselves and their community, adapt and/or celebrate these differences, integrate them into personal identity, and develop a "constructive marginality" (Daloz, 2000).

#### **B. Critical Reflection**

The presence of the other is less impactful without critical reflection about the assumptions that have been challenged. For students to learn, they must actively engage in dialogue about their experiences and assumptions. This in turn can help them to better understand other people and where they might be coming from. Daloz notes that this dialogue must take place in an environment where participants feel safe and free of judgement, where emphasis is placed on understanding, and where confusion is recognized as a legitimate part of the learning process (2000). GESI's pre-departure coursework primes participants for this kind of dialogue. Students create guidelines for discussion and have the opportunity to self-determine the agenda and

conditions for a safe, yet challenging environment. They get to know the other students who they will be working with in-country and begin a series of open letters, or short reflections based on flexible prompts, which they will be required to share weekly with a small group of people in country.

Danielle and Caroline consistently supported each other in Bolivia when challenged with the daily frustrations of learning a foreign language and the customs of an unfamiliar country. They also relied on one another when processing deeper personal issues related to understanding self and identity abroad. The facilitated reflection and continual discussion before, during, and after being in-country were crucial to both of their developments. Caroline continued to study abroad twice more in Greece and South Africa, and she brought the reflection and dialogue component of GESI with her during all of her experiences. She cites reflection as the main reason that she continued to have transformative experiences in each new location. Danielle worked abroad in Buenos Aires for three months in 2016 and continued to blog her experience in order to help her process the ways in which her whiteness changed meaning depending on the national context within South America.

#### C. Mentoring Community

A mentoring community, the third pillar of Daloz's framework for transformative learning for the common good, serves as a basis for all GESI and Buffett related activity (2000). Relationships are key in developing a sense of self in relation to the world. Daloz says that people who sustain a long term commitment to serving the common good often describe a mentoring community, or a web of relationships with people who value diversity and reflective discourse (2000). The GESI program concludes with a final summit, where participants return from their host countries to reflect on their experiences with other students who went to different countries. The final summit also include panels with graduates of the program that are currently working in public interest or community development fields to show outgoing students potential continuations of GESI learning in different career fields. These last few days of GESI allowed Caroline and Danielle to solidify relationships with their peers who participated in the program, as well as network with people who could become their mentors in various fields and at the rest of their studies at Northwestern. Both of them still keep in touch with many of the students their year, and they both now work as fellows at the Buffett Institute. This has allowed them to continue building and maintaining relationships with likeminded peers as well as Buffett staff who have provided them with mentorship and professional development support.

#### D. Opportunities for Committed Action

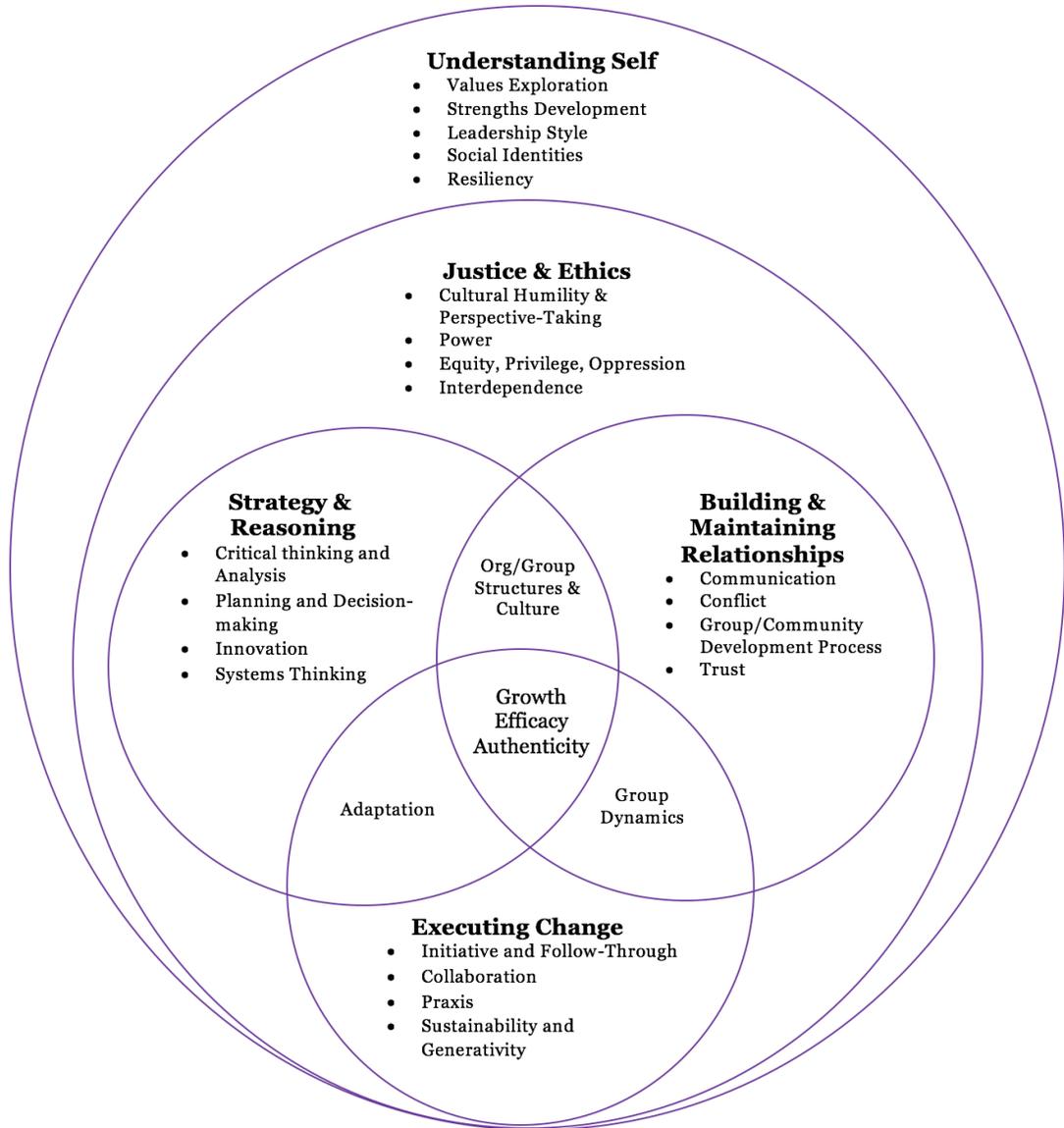
Daloz cites the last condition for transformative learning for the common good as "opportunities for committed action," which for Danielle and Caroline, is closely linked with their mentorship

community (2000). Through sustained relationships with the students and Buffett staff involved in GESI, they continued to find ways to use their strengths to serve their communities following the conclusion of GESI. In their role as fellows, they hear about different engagement opportunities and are supported in pursuing them. GESI final summit also includes a dissemination of information about fellowships and grants that students can explore after GESI or after college graduation. These opportunities also expose them to offices at Northwestern that they may not have known about, like the Office of Fellowships, where Danielle and Caroline learned more ways to engage locally and abroad.

### **Leadership Development**

If Daloz's "Conditions for Transformative Learning" articulates *how* Danielle and Caroline developed during their time in GESI, the leadership framework developed by Northwestern's Department of Leadership and Community Engagement describes *what* exactly they developed. The basis for leadership is an Understanding of Self, then positioning yourself through a lens of Justice and Ethics, through which Building and Maintaining Relationships, Strategy and Reasoning, and Executing Change occur. GESI and the ABCD framework develop qualities beneath the umbrella of each of these subheadings.

## The Leadership Framework



### A. Understanding of Self

One way that Caroline and Danielle first worked on understanding self was through an ability to identify and develop their personal strengths. This is only one aspect of a category that also promotes leadership styles exploration, resiliency, understanding social identities, and reflecting on personal values. Their leadership enhanced in all of these ways, but through using the ABCD framework, recognizing and building off of personal assets was one of the most salient ways that Caroline and Danielle were able to understand themselves in a post-GESEI context.

During GESEI, Caroline worked with another Northwestern student, Wendy Roldan, at an NGO that makes solar powered ovens and ecological stoves for families in rural areas of Bolivia. Key to the success of their project was recognizing each person's strengths (also a key component to ABCD). Caroline primarily focused on research and preparing questions for field interviews, while Wendy, studying mechanical engineering, worked on the actual stove design. Both Caroline and Wendy built on the work that the NGO was already doing, and they especially relied on the local staff to help craft culturally relevant questions and build a design that worked in a rural home where neither Caroline nor Wendy had ever been. Through this experience, Caroline was also able to reflect on why and how ABCD aligns with her own personal values, and she plans on continuing to use this framework in any future line of work that she enters.

At the beginning of GESEI, Danielle struggled to find her place at her NGO, Fundación Enseñarte. As an organization focused on circus skills, Danielle felt like she had little to offer to her new community due to her lack of knowledge of circus skills, so she first focused on building relationships with the other staff members to learn how she could be of best use. By preparing food daily with the NGO's chef, Danielle learned more about the backgrounds of the children and the school system in Bolivia. Feeling more confident about her place, Danielle along with the two other GESEI students and other volunteers developed a project to create a permanent "education hour" within the daily NGO programming so that the children could have a safe and comfortable place to do their homework and learn supplementary topics such as geography, chess and music. By struggling to translate her skills in a new setting, Danielle was able to reflect on her strengths of relationship building and adaptability, and she continues to apply that method of self-evaluative thinking to every new community she joins now, including her work as a tutor at a local elementary school and at an Centro Romero, immigrant center in Chicago.

### B. Justice and Ethics

Social justice orientation builds off of self understanding and development. A key part of the justice and ethics domain is cultural humility and perspective taking, which touch on the other components of power; equity, privilege, and oppression; and interdependence, when combined with the critical social identities and values exploration of understanding self.

Caroline and Wendy executed their final project in a way that reflects cultural humility. Even though they were originally asked to write lesson plans to go with the ecological cookers for teachers in rural schools, they instead made a book of resources for the teachers to use and access. Neither Caroline nor Wendy are certified teachers nor had any real substantial experience in education. They realized that the best way to use their skills would be to come up with more flexible materials that the teachers could use in their own way. This also impacted Caroline's understanding of her own journalistic ethics. She learned that she values journalism in which she works with her subjects to get to know them and provide a platform for them to tell their own stories, rather than trying to take the lead as an outsider. She learned that her leadership style in that sense is about empowering others and showing how and why their stories are meaningful. Her time in Bolivia taught her the limitations of her knowledge and the importance of listening and learning before attempting to craft a story, and she continues to keep these lessons in mind in her journalistic work.

Danielle learned the lesson of cultural humility during her first few weeks in Bolivia when the manager of the NGO asked her and the other volunteers to conduct community surveys that to assess the needs of the families served by the NGO and the ways they could improve. Danielle and her group only spoke mediocre Spanish and struggled to navigate around Cochabamba and the surrounding towns to conduct these surveys. More importantly, Danielle and her team felt uncomfortable asking the families they had only just met the deeply personal questions of the survey such as: what is the rate of sexual violence in your neighborhood, how much money do you make, what food do you feed your children, etc. Yet despite not knowing any of them, these families welcomed the group of university students into their home, offered them food and refreshments (valuable resources) and answered anything asked. The level of trust these families placed in foreigners and the NGO surprised Danielle and her team, and they were struck by their generosity, especially in contrast to the way that many of the Americans they are familiar with react to strangers of a different ethnic or national background. Furthermore, the answers to the survey questions were jarring, as Danielle realized how different these families were from her own in terms of resources and cultural practices. Danielle learned that she could assume no cultural knowledge: she was the stranger in this community and should approach every situation and her work at the NGO as a learner and not a teacher. The locals are the experts, and she was only there to aid in the ways that her strengths allowed her to, within the limits and demands of the community. This lesson proved invaluable in Danielle's later engagements post-GESI, especially in volunteering and tutoring adults in GED or naturalization, where assumptions of previous knowledge can lead to ineffective learning and potential stigmatization.

### C. Building and Maintaining Relationships

After cultural humility, a social justice orientation, and understanding of self, comes the successful fostering and maintenance of relationships. Key to building relationships is Communication and trust are the keys to building relationships, and only after that can sustainable community development be achieved.

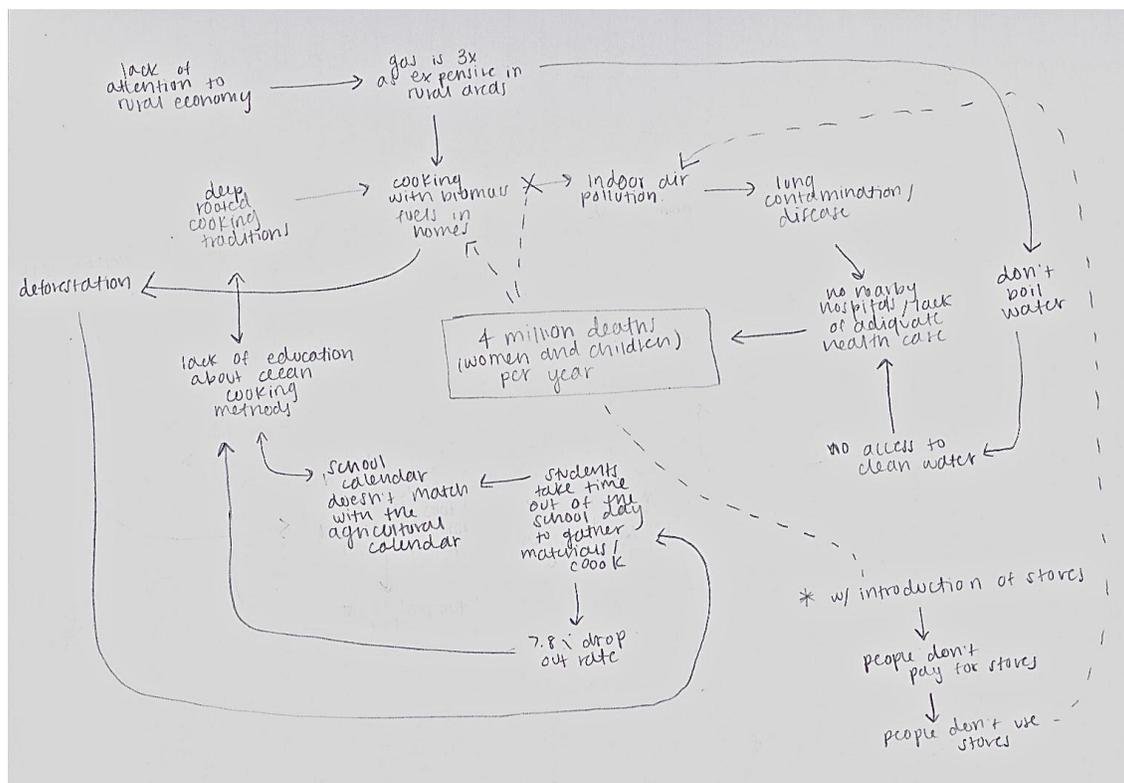
Caroline's coworkers only trusted her because of the humility she showed. She constantly asked them questions when she didn't understand something and tried to remove herself from the limits of her own perspective. When Caroline and Wendy traveled to the rural areas of Bolivia to conduct surveys, they found that many of the young students in the schools didn't trust them as two outsiders who spoke English and Spanish, but not Quechua, their local language. Asking survey questions immediately upon arrival was very unsuccessful. Caroline and Wendy were able to recognize their own strengths working with children, as well as their own weaknesses in not knowing the local language, to come up with a way to gain trust with the children before asking personal questions. They learned that if they entered each school and played a game like tag or duck-duck-goose outside with all of the children before trying to ask the survey questions, the children were much more trusting and receptive to the translators' questions. Caroline and Wendy gained their trust through an alternative form of communication, which helped foster a sense of community among the two distinct groups of people.

Similarly, Danielle focused on building relationships before developing a project in order to fully familiarize herself with the assets of the community and the ways in which she could contribute. Her friendship with the chef and Danielle's role in serving food every day demonstrated to the children that she was a person who could be trusted. By dancing with the girls and performing in the circus show alongside them, Danielle further gained their trust. Soon they opened up to her about their personal lives, and as a result, they were much more willing to learn and be honest about their academic frustrations. The male GESI students with Danielle also bonded with the boys of the NGO in similar ways, by performing alongside them and learning to juggle. At the end of the program, all the GESI participants had bonded so deeply with the local children that they all cried when leaving, and Danielle still keeps in touch with some of the kids today through social media. By learning to gain trust before trying to facilitate any change, GESI teaches its students to reflect on each situation uniquely before making generalizations and enacting change.

### D. Strategy and Reasoning

Building off of an understanding of self and one's own place in a community, a justice orientation and mindfulness of ethics with the basis of strong relationships, Caroline and Danielle have been able to think more broadly and strategize about how to make more permanent, systematic change.

In Bolivia, Caroline did a lot of systems mapping to understand how indoor air pollution affects different people in the community and identify pollution's many sources. This helped her understand her place in the system and what she was able to do. It was only through reflection and relationships with community members that Caroline was able to map out these issues in a way that reflected an understanding of the community.



Danielle and her team spent several weeks analyzing the education system in Bolivia in order to develop an education plan for the NGO that would account for the strengths and weaknesses of the existing school system. They spoke to the kids, several parents and the staff of the NGO. They tried to visit a school and meet with teachers but the days off from holidays and the schedules of the children left them unable to do so; therefore, Danielle and her team made note of this in their final project so that the NGO understood that more community actors needed to be evaluated before cementing a final plan that would enable the most innovative and systematic change in education.

### E. Executing Change

Executing change is the final major component of the leadership framework. It is mainly

encouraged at the end of GESI during the final summit where resources are described and provided that detail the ways in which students can remain involved with Buffett and the affiliated student groups focused on social change. One such way students can continue reflecting on their GESI experience is through a case study Northwestern course which Caroline took. Together with her partner Wendy, they wrote an article that was published in *The International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change*.

Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* defines praxis as "reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed" (2009). Through praxis, oppressed people can acquire a critical awareness of their own condition, and, with their allies, struggle for liberation. "For apart from inquiry, apart from the praxis, individuals cannot be truly human. Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other" (Freire, 2009). GESI empowers its students with a curriculum that teaches liberation as a praxis and provides the tools for students to engage with that praxis during and after the program ends. Throughout their entire experience, Danielle and Caroline were engaging in active reflection and turning that reflection into action: Caroline left the CEDESOL having created academic resources for teachers to use with the new ecological stoves, and Danielle executed an after school tutoring program with Fundacion Enseñarte and created a manual for future volunteers to continue the hour of education every day.

Both Danielle and Caroline continued their engagement with the GESI community by serving as fellows at the Buffett Institute for the 2016-17 academic year: Danielle focused on the GESI program and Caroline on Public Relations/Communications. The environment where the seven student fellows work--together with GESI and Buffett staff-- encourages a type of "problem-posing education" where no topic is off limits (Freire, 2009). It is a space for questioning systems, ideas, and common conceptions, while also serving to be supportive and motivational for students and staff of diverse backgrounds and places on campus. As Freire describes in his text, problem-posing education reconstructs everyday assumptions: "the world--no longer something to be described with deceptive words--becomes the object of that transforming action by men and women which results in their humanization" (2009). This humanization, in turn, establishes a path to leadership, which Danielle and Caroline have engaged in fully in their roles as fellows. They have taken various initiatives from marketing videos and events for GESI recruitment to coordinating clothing drives to benefit local Evanston organizations. They also developed a paid student ambassador program to further expand the community of globally-engaged scholars at Northwestern.

## **Conclusion**

The entirety of the GESI education, from immersion to fellowship opportunities, allows students of every background to undergo transformative learning and become leaders in whatever field they chose because the program focuses on liberation and empowerment through tangible service learning, reflection, and action and puts students in the position of agency.

Caroline sees her leadership development continuing in the opportunities that she is pursuing in the future. She is looking for journalism jobs that allow her to create relationships with the people she is writing on or producing films about. For the past few months, Caroline has been working on a documentary about a band of undocumented immigrants from the Back of the Yards neighborhood in Chicago, with the aim of providing a platform for the band members to share their story. She and her team have been working include as much input from other members of the Back of the Yards community as possible to make sure they are working in partnership rather than leading as outsiders. Relationship building has been the best way for Caroline to continue to grow as a journalist. She is always engaging in active reflection to ensure that her work aligns with her values and ethics. Writing this essay has taught her that she is still in the process of learning and developing as a leader, and this is just a jumping off point for her future endeavors.

The framework of GESI and resulting engagement has permanently shaped the way Danielle thinks about leadership. Her leadership style mainly focuses on facilitating others. The privilege of her education and experiences have provided her with a valuable set of knowledge that she now actively seeks to share with others in order for them to then enhance their own communities. For example, after returning from her internship with Senator Durbin this past summer on Capitol Hill, Danielle expanded her involvement in Centro Romero and began assistant teaching a naturalization class. Her understanding of government combined with her Spanish language skills have been invaluable in tutoring the applicants who are taking the citizenship exam in Spanish. Furthermore, she wanted to become more involved locally and share her passion for education, so she became a tutor at an elementary school through Books & Breakfast, a Buffett-affiliated program. To her, leadership means living in praxis: identifying personal strengths, understanding one's position in a community and taking action when possible.

Next year, Danielle will be working as an English Teaching Assistant Universidad Camilo José Cela in Madrid, Spain, on a Fulbright grant. She will be helping in the Communication and Education degree courses as well as their student initiative focused on globalization. She hopes to bring this leadership framework, a GESI-inspired, problem-posing curriculum of liberation, and her passion for social justice and active reflection to the students at the University.

The leadership development both Caroline and Danielle gained in their time in GESI and at Northwestern will continue to inform future decisions of involvement and participation in like-minded, action-oriented communities and careers. For them, the most valuable part of their entire undergraduate education has been the confidence they've gained in their ability to orient themselves toward living lives focused on the pursuit of liberation, no matter what their futures hold.

### Works Cited

Daloz, L. A. P. (2000). Transformative Learning for the Common Good. *Learning as Transformation*, 103-123.

Department of Leadership and Community Engagement, Northwestern University. (2017). Leadership Framework Available at: <http://www.northwestern.edu/lead-engage/leadership-framework/index.html>

Freire, P. (2009). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.

Roldan, W. & Olsen, C. (2016). Materiales Didácticos para Toro Toro Foundation for Sustainable Development: CEDESOL Cochabamba, Bolivia (2016 Case Study). *International Undergraduate Journal For Service-Learning, Leadership, and Social Change*, 25, 11-21. Available at: <http://opus.govst.edu/iujsl/vol6/iss1/4>