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The Social Change Model of Leadership Development: A Service-Learning Reflection

Kayla Taylor
The College of New Jersey.

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Introduction

Service-learning is considered a Signature Experience at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ), marking it as a key experience for all TCNJ community members. For the purpose of this article, *service-learning* includes community engagement, civic engagement and other terms used on various campuses. Beginning with a required first year community engaged learning (CEL) experience, the College puts an emphasis on social change and using higher education to fulfill its civic mission and serve communities. In addition, teaching leadership skills is a major component of TCNJ's mission. Recent leadership research has focused on the cooperative skills necessary to lead a team or group. This research can be used to inform the skills that are being taught to students before they begin their service-learning experiences. The Social Change Model (SCM) of Leadership Development (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996) aligns with TCNJ's model for service-learning, as well as the model many colleges are trying to implement, and could be used to help inform curriculum development in terms of preparing students for service-learning experiences.

Service-Learning Experience

In 2012, TCNJ created the Center for Community Engaged Learning and Research (CELR) to support activities that integrate educational experiences with community service, student development, and civic participation. As a rising senior at TCNJ, I have had the opportunity to take multiple courses with service-learning aspects and/or requirements. During freshmen year, one way for students to satisfy their first-year CEL requirement is take a seminar course, which includes an introductory ten-hour service experience. This course is designed to introduce students to the problems the community around the school, primarily Trenton, NJ, faces and encourage the development of civic responsibility. Trenton is home to nearly 85,000 residents, and the median household income is $35,647. More than one quarter of its residents (28.4%) have incomes below the poverty level, particularly in female-headed family households with dependent children (45.7% of households with children under 5). The city is predominantly ethnic minority with over half of its residents (52.0%) identifying as African American; 33.7%

Kayla Taylor is a senior at The College of New Jersey. She studies Early Childhood Education and Psychology. After graduation, she plans to go to graduate school for a Master's in Community Psychology or Social Change and work towards pursing a job in educational policy.

identify as Latino (U.S. Census Bureau American Community Survey, 2016). Two of the most significant challenges residents face are in the areas of education and public health. In 2015, Trenton reported the lowest high school graduation rate in the state (68.6%), and the city has a history of battling high rates of non-violent and violent crimes, particularly gang- and drug-related violence (Dow, Fuentes, Bice, & Nally, 2010). Many organizations, including organizations at TCNJ, work together to help combat some of Trenton's problems and empower citizens to become involved in creating change.

For my freshmen seminar experience, I visited a group home for adults with developmental disabilities. As someone who has experience working with people with disabilities, I enjoyed visiting the group home, and this experience encouraged me to continue searching for more opportunities to get involved in service experiences at TCNJ. However, the short-term design of required freshmen service-learning is not ideal for developing or maintaining student interest in service-learning. Professors of freshmen seminar classes are not always responsible for the service-learning component of the course, so it is sometimes unrelated to the topic of the course. The disconnect between course content and the service-learning component may affect student's ability to develop a meaningful connection to the service-learning experience. If students are unable to connect to the importance of the service-learning experience, they may not adopt the skills or knowledge that the service-learning experience aims to provide. While a mandatory service-learning component may be a beneficial addition to a program, students in my class seemed to agree that it would be more beneficial if they were prepared well during the course and if the site/community issue related to their interests.

In addition to the freshmen seminar course, TCNJ offers advanced service-learning courses called Advanced Community Engaged Learning (ACEL). The majority of my service-learning experiences have happened because of my involvement in a psychology research lab for three semesters. Through the lab, I have worked closely with my professor/mentor and other undergraduate students on community-based projects. One project, however, has changed my outlook on social justice and influenced my goals for the future. The lab collaborated with a non-profit organization in Trenton to develop an after-school arts program for ninth grade students who were identified by their guidance counselors as at-risk of dropping out of school. Youth in Trenton face problems that are often cited in low-income urban areas, such as gang violence, domestic issues, substance abuse, and high dropout rates. The program curriculum included teaching the ninth graders creative arts techniques, particularly filmmaking and poetry, as well as leadership skills. The goal of the program was to provide them with an outlet that allows them to make their voices heard in a peaceful and powerful way. Program participants wrote original poetry and created films about the problems they face every day and struggles within their community, and they were encouraged to be true to themselves and share what they were really

thinking about those issues. My role as a college student in this collaboration was to attend weekly sessions, help youth develop and edit their poetry and films, as well as take attendance and conduct post-program research interviews.

One of the highlights of this experience was seeing the way the ninth graders interacted with the program leader. The program leader was relatable, outgoing, and genuine, but still demanded youths' cooperation and respect. When the students were ready to quit or stopped coming, she pushed them to continue and to finish their poems and films. Her leadership abilities stood out to me as a vital component in the success of the program. Watching her interact with the students inspired me to reevaluate my own qualities and reflect on the type of leader I am myself – specifically, whether I am a truly cooperative and supportive leader in roles that I have in my own life. As always with community-based research, researchers are required to juggle multiple roles. For me, this included balancing my role as a researcher while still ensuring I was an approachable resource to the students. I had to keep in mind my role as a researcher, while remembering the reason for the program - to support struggling students and empower them to find their own voices.

Integrating Research and Service-Learning

As students in the psychology lab, my peers and I were responsible for helping to maintain documents for grant requirements and assist with data collection. Grant maintenance included keeping records of program attendance and taking session notes that included that day's tasks. Data collection was challenging to balance with developing a relationship with the students. The students knew we were going to be interviewing them about the program and, while they were told that the interviews were being conducted to evaluate the program (and not judge them) it took a long time to develop a relationship with the students so that they were comfortable being themselves when we were there. And even after establishing solid relationships with them during program sessions, some of the students were shy and soft-spoken during interviews.

Personal reflection was a major component of my involvement in the program. Consistent with the findings of previous research, I found that I gained more from my service-learning experiences if I took time to reflect on them (Eyler & Giles, 1996). During lab meetings, my professor would ask lab students to reflect on all aspects of program development and data collection, including how to develop relationships with the students, why youth empowerment is critical, and how we create social change. Since I had no previous experience in Trenton or any area like it, I was shocked by some of the life circumstances and the severity of what the students dealt with on a daily basis. At first, it was hard to separate from the anger I felt towards city officials for not doing more to help youth. As the program continued, however, I realized that the

social problems I saw were complex and not always the fault of any one group of people. I focused my energy into working towards the goal of empowering youth to take control of their own lives and make their voices heard. I found it particularly meaningful to have opportunities to directly impact the lives of the students and give them opportunities to directly impact mine as well. Research has the power to start and inform conversations about policy change, and research from programs like this one can be a particularly powerful tool in ensuring that more after school programs are available to youth.

Data collection is so important for documenting program impact, which is why our research interviews included both qualitative and quantitative components - to capture a comprehensive representation of the students' experiences. The quantitative section was aimed at measuring parent involvement, student's academic performance, program evaluation, and program outcomes, such as specific skills students may have developed. The qualitative interviews focused on how the program affected student development and how students developed motivation to join and stay engaged in program activities. Each lab member had the opportunity to interview at least one student. The interview process was a unique learning experience, as many undergraduates do not get the opportunity to take such an active role in research. Conducting an interview was also a very nerve-wracking experience because it was the first time I was interviewing a participant. Learning the correct interview protocol (e.g., how much to probe each response and not lead the participant or bias their answers) while maintaining a good rapport with youth (e.g., making the interview feel like a conversation) was a learning process. After spending an entire semester working with these students, it was very hard to not confirm the student's thoughts or get them to answer as if we did not know anything about the program. However, it was amazing to see how much they appreciated the program and recognized how it changed them for the better. While we are still reviewing results from our data collection, it was clear from the interviews that the program had a positive effect on the students. In addition to the program clearly having an impact on the students, the experience also has had a significant impact on me, personally.

Leadership Within Service-Learning

TCNJ's focus on service-learning and community engagement provided me with the opportunity to work with students in Trenton, which has changed my view on leadership, social justice, and service-learning. After my experiences in Trenton, I have reflected deeply on what leadership is and what it should be. I believe that college students should be learning about effective and collaborative leadership, especially if they are going to be involved in a service-learning project (Chung, Taylor, & Nehila, 2017). If a student is not fully prepared, they may not have a good experience when working with the community, which can deter students from

becoming involved in future service-learning courses and activities. Negative experiences with community members also have the potential to do my harm to communities and leave them worse off than when you started the service-learning experience (Stoecker, 2016).

One way to prepare students for service-learning experiences is to have them complete a curriculum, specifically in the area of leadership. Working with community partners and community members during service-learning requires collaboration and the ability to see multiple points of view. It is critical to teach these skills prior to students beginning service-learning experiences. Leadership research has considered leadership skills, such as collaboration and handling controversy with civility, and developed a model called the Social Change Model (SCM) of Leadership Development (HERI, 1996). The SCM was designed specifically for use with college students and emphasizes instilling leadership qualities in all undergraduate students, not only those holding leadership positions. The model is centered on the idea that leadership is collaborative and should be based on collective action, shared responsibility/power, and a shared commitment to social change (Wagner, 2006). The SCM aligns with the goals of service-learning because it describes leadership as a group process in which the goal is change towards social justice (Wagner, 2006). In the SCM, change for the common good and social responsibility are achieved through the development of eight core values aimed at advancing students' levels of self-awareness and ability to work with other people (Wagner, 2006).

The model is divides its core values into individual, group, and community values (HERI, 1996). This organization resembles many service-learning models that require individual stakeholders to work as a group, with the common goal of bettering the community. Within each set, critical values are outlined that can be taught through the incorporation of leadership curricula in courses. Individual values include consciousness of self, congruence to one's values, and commitment. Group values include collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility. Finally, the community values include citizenship and change (Wagner, 2006). These values could be used as learning objectives for a leadership curriculum and should be addressed directly. With so many stakeholders involved in service-learning projects, it is important that all partners are aware of the importance of collaboration and common goals, but are willing to approach controversy and general decision-making with respect and an open mind.

My experiences forced me to reevaluate my own approach to leadership and I have found that I have grown most in areas outlined by the SCM. After my experiences in Trenton, I am more socially aware and am able to form more educated opinions. The experience helped me discover my own values and truly understand what is important to me individually. Because I am more socially and self-aware, I am able to better express my opinions and act in ways that truly align

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with my own values. In addition, I am able engage in civil controversy because I understand that even if my opinions are backed by experience and knowledge, there are people with differing opinions who may have had different experiences or come from different backgrounds. Because I worked with many different stakeholders (e.g., the program leader, the students, my professor, and my peers), I value the importance of controversy because it can lead to productive conversations and action that is effective for everyone involved. My experiences in Trenton have led me to become more open-minded and open to differing opinions, which I believe is the most important outcome of the SCM, as it is serves as a good first step for collaborating with others towards social justice. In order to collaborate with others effectively, it is important to understand your own values and embrace the differing opinions of others. Without varying opinions, change would not occur.

Overall, service-learning is a positive and motivating experience, but the preparation level of students is a key factor in its success. Considering leadership development is a vital starting point when preparing students because students may be working with community partners on service-learning projects. Even if students do not work directly with community members, it is critical that students understand their role in the partnership and how their behaviors can shape service-learning outcomes. Going into an unfamiliar community can be shocking, emotionally exhausting, and require difficult adjustments. But with the help of leadership preparation that emphasizes values at the individual, group, and community/society level, students will be more likely to enter the experience with an open mind, willingness to learn, and skills to contribute.

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