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CULTIVATING LEADERS OF INDIANA:

Global Collaborations and Local Impacts

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ABSTRACT

“Cultivating Leaders of Indiana” was developed to establish connections between the Purdue student body and the Frankfort, Indiana, community. By engaging high school students in workshops that focused on local, national, and global identities, the goal of the project was to encourage students to appreciate their individuality and to motivate them to translate their skills into a global perspective. Moreover, workshops centering on themes such as culture, citizenship, media, and education were designed to empower project participants to embrace their sense of social value and responsibility, not only in their immediate communities, but also globally.

KEYWORDS

leadership, identity, education, culture, global citizenship, Indiana

INTRODUCTION

Great leadership is essential for the sustainable development of a just and equal world. Great leaders inspire and motivate individuals and groups to care about and work for the benefit of their respective communities, nations, and the entire global society. However, to become a great leader, one must have deep self-awareness, strong self-esteem, critical education, and a global outlook. These convictions motivated us to design and implement the service-learning project “Cultivating Leaders of Indiana” with a group of female high school students in Frankfort, Indiana. From October 2015 to April 2016, we met with a group of twelve Latina high school students for ten workshops at the Purdue Extension Learning Network (local community center). The workshops focused on questions of identity, education, and global citizenship as central components of leadership development.

The decision to engage issues that concern Latino high school students from immigrant families in Frankfort,

Indiana, was shaped by our previous academic research in this Midwestern town. Our studies of community relations in Frankfort revealed that Latino immigrants and their children have been consistently facing and coping with social isolation and hostility from many nonimmigrant residents. These negative social attitudes toward Latino immigrants have made some Latino students feel ashamed of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage. Moreover, Latino students lack a sense of belonging to the Frankfort community and a sense of social value. Therefore, the series of workshops were designed to: (1) help students gain a better understanding of the richness of their identities and heritage; (2) motivate students to pursue education and use it to become more engaged leaders in Frankfort; and (3) to help students get a greater awareness of their significant roles as global citizens and leaders.

Figure 1 (banner image, above). An identity map created in our workshop. Courtesy of Jennifer Sdunzik.

DESCRIPTION

Workshop Design

Our workshops were informed by concepts such as identity, education, and global citizenship. At the beginning of each meeting with the participants, we laid the foundation by defining the theme of the workshop and introducing key concepts. Next, we asked the participants to recognize the concepts in different historical and contemporary events and examples. Then, the participants applied the concepts to their personal life experiences. Each workshop concluded with students exchanging their ideas on the significance of the topic to their daily realities and to leadership development.

As a teaching approach, we employed the critical pedagogy of Paulo Freire. In his influential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (2000) views education as a liberating practice that allows students and teachers to relate to each other as equal co-creators of knowledge and to challenge dominant views about social issues. Inspired by this philosophy and pedagogy, we created a student-centered and dialogue-based environment to empower students to voice their ideas and concerns freely. At the same time, using a critical pedagogy approach, we as educators learned more about students' family histories and present realities, which helped us to make the workshop experience relevant and meaningful to their everyday lives.

Workshop 1—Introductions

We used the first workshop meeting as time and space for project participants to get to know organizers and other students better. Each participant and organizer shared her life story, backgrounds, and personal and professional interests and aspirations. We also talked about workshop goals and what each participant and organizer seeks to contribute and to receive from the project.

Workshops 2–4—Identity and Leadership

Our workshop series began by introducing the frameworks of identity and leadership. Even though leadership means different things to different people around the globe and can be applied to different contexts (e.g., political leadership, religious leadership, or community leadership), we must understand how our own identity affects the way we lead, make decisions, and interpret the world around us. We can only serve as a leader and role model if we are fully aware of our personal strengths, weaknesses, skills, and values. Since leadership values and behaviors often originate in personal

identities, our goal was to establish a common understanding of what we mean by the concept of identity. We invited our participants to share their insights on the concept and expanded together on the meaning. Besides clarifying that all of us have multiple identities, some of which are more visible and more flexible, we distinguished for the purposes of our workshops between three types of identity:

- ascribed or given identity as the attributes or conditions in which we had no choice (e.g., birthplace, physical characteristics, or age);
- achieved or chosen identity as the status or attributes that we choose, including hobbies, political affiliation, and occupation; and
- core identity as the attributes that make us unique as individuals, which include traits, behaviors, beliefs, values, and skills.

During these workshops, we exposed our participants to real-world examples to provide opportunities to identify various identities. These examples derived from StoryCorps, an independent nonprofit organization that records and shares stories of everyday Americans from all backgrounds and beliefs. The stories we selected—such as “It’s hard to leave everything you know,” “It’s surprising the life lessons you can learn in a kitchen,” or “A las dos de la mañana, me habló de Nogales”—were told either in Spanish or English by individuals of different ages and racial and ethnic backgrounds. The stories accentuated key lessons learned in life and illustrated different parts of our identities, some of which our participants were able to identify with based on similar life experiences.

Once our participants successfully linked the theoretical knowledge about identity provided at the beginning of the workshop to concrete examples and some of their own experiences, they further explored the concept by creating identity maps to identify their own multiple roles, qualities, and attributes. This exercise allowed them to reflect more deeply upon the qualities that mattered most to them and why. It also enabled them to express and embrace their various identities by drawing instead of writing their name or traits and using different colorful markers for different identities, as reflected in Figure 1. In the concluding discussion with other participants, the group identified commonalities and differences based upon their identity maps in general in addition to a selection of the three most important qualities in their lives. The conversation also emphasized how to translate these values and qualities into proactive leadership within the community in which they live.

Workshops 5 and 6—Education and Leadership

The fifth and sixth workshops covered the topics of education and leadership. The goal of these workshops was to help students see the value of education and to understand how it can help young people become leaders in their communities. For the purposes of our discussions, we defined education as the learning process by which people enhance their understanding of themselves and their relationship to a local and a global society. In our presentations, we highlighted that we are shaped by education daily, as we gain knowledge about different political, economic, and sociocultural processes both formally and informally. Moreover, our dialogues emphasized that education is one of the most effective instruments to develop leadership consciousness and skills.

To provide examples of how education cultivates leadership for positive transformation, we introduced the students to the life experiences and contributions of several women leaders of color in the battle against racism and sexism in US society. We focused on the lives of Sojourner Truth, Patsy Mink, Dolores Huerta, and others to underline how these female activists used their education to advocate for equal rights for women, ethnic and racial minority groups, and other vulnerable populations in their own communities, in the larger US society, and beyond. We also highlighted the role of women activists in the fight against different forms of discrimination to raise students' self-confidence as female leaders who can utilize their education to enhance cross-cultural understanding between Latino immigrant families and the larger Frankfort community.

Another goal of the workshop on education was to support the aspirations of our participants to continue their education after high school. Therefore, to foster a more in-depth thinking among students about their future academic goals, we conducted an exercise called "write yourself a letter." As a part of this project, the young women were asked to write letters to their future selves about their educational interests and the importance of higher education to their personal and professional lives. As participants detailed their educational goals and ambitions, they were able to increase self-awareness of themselves as young female leaders who strive to succeed academically today to build a better future tomorrow.

Workshops 7–9—Global Citizenship

In order to make connections between the previously introduced concepts of identity, leadership, and education, we covered the concept of global citizenship in the

last part of our workshop series. Even though global citizenship can be defined broadly, for the purposes of our workshops, we narrowed its definition to underlying key concepts such as "self-awareness as well as outward awareness," participation ("contributing to the political or social life of a community"), and cross-cultural engagement (Schattle, 2009, p. 10, 13, 15).

The motivation behind developing workshops around this particular theme came from our participants' embrace of multiple cultural and linguistic identities. For example, many of the young women travel to relatives in various Central American countries or speak Spanish at home. However, they had a limited understanding of how their cultural experiences and language skills already make them a part of the world society. In this context, the concept of global citizenship provided us with a new way of thinking and conversing about our place in society and our relationships with others in today's increasingly interdependent world.

Because bilingualism and biculturalism are two key aspects of global citizenship, we used their own personal examples to point out that speaking several languages and being immersed in different cultures is the norm rather than the exception and characterizes them as members of the global community. Additionally, we emphasized various health benefits of bilingualism, such as reducing the chance of suffering from Alzheimer's and dementia. Other benefits include improving cognitive thinking and multitasking skills, creativity, and academic performance. We also stressed that being bilingual and bicultural fosters a cultural competency—the ability to relate to people from different walks of life. All of these qualities characterize a strong leader.

We sensed that the topic was very important to our participants because our discussions revealed that these are two aspects of their identity that are continuously suppressed in the community in which they live and study. Thus, in order for our participants to embrace and appreciate their bilingualism, we had them identify all 21 countries in the world that recognize Spanish as an official language. As a result, students realized that being bilingual connects them to different continents and offers opportunities to practice their global citizenship.

We also intended for the workshop to establish a better understanding of the size of the world—that the world transcends Indiana and US borders. Therefore, we asked our participants to draw the world according to their recollection and imagination. In other words, the maps were not supposed to replicate a map of the world, but rather

emphasize places relevant to each student. Relevance could be based on Spanish- and English-speaking countries but also include places they would like to travel, places they have visited in the past, or locales they connect with acquaintances and friends. Our goal was to have participants reflect on opportunities in today's global age by tracing their connections to close and distant places across the globe. The activity also intended to increase participants' interest to explore the opportunities the world has to offer. Some discussions during the map-drawing activity touched upon study abroad opportunities before, during, and after college; others explored options on how to make travel more affordable (e.g., by staying with friends, traveling with others, and volunteering while traveling).

Workshop 10—Future Collaboration

Workshop 10 was devoted to the discussion of future projects with Latina students. We were impressed by students' curiosity about a plethora of additional themes and decided to continue our project in the fall of 2016. We also agreed that our future topics, partially suggested by the participants themselves, will include health, art, technology, and environment and the ways in which these interact with questions of self-understanding and leadership. The students have also asked us to revisit some of the topics already covered and take a different approach to them. For example, they expressed interest in an elaborate discussion about language in connection to career opportunities. Students were confident that the project in fall 2016 would be just as engaging and enriching for everyone involved, and we have decided to invite more participants from their high school.

COMMUNITY IMPACT

At the end of our last workshop, we asked our participants to reflect upon their participation in the program

Figure 2. Letter received at the culmination of our workshop series. Courtesy of Jennifer Sdunzik.

as a whole (Figure 2). Based on their feedback, we have identified four major impacts of our workshops:

1. Our participants opened up and talked about certain aspects of identities they wanted to discuss but never had the space or opportunity to do so.
2. Our participants reflected on their positionalities as young minority women in U.S. society and beyond.
3. The series of workshops reinforced their desire to continue education.
4. The workshops inspired them to think of themselves as leaders and to become more engaged in their communities and in social justice issues that affect global society.

STUDENT IMPACT

Topics of identity, global citizenship, and education demand a two-way street. Through the workshops, we could leave a mark with the participants in terms of embracing who they are as individuals and leaders. However, their enthusiasm, experiences, and thirst for knowledge have also greatly impacted us. As two international students with extensive community engagement prior to enrollment in a doctoral program at Purdue University, we see it as our responsibility to engage the communities in which we live and work. Therefore, seeing that our previous experience and new academic knowledge put into practice have inspired young women to become transformational leaders, we are motivated to continue working with minority youth in Indiana and in other parts of the world. Moreover, beyond the educational enrichment on both sides, we developed meaningful relationships and friendships, which we will maintain throughout our lives.

CONCLUSION

Our mission to motivate students to embrace their identities and develop leadership vision and consciousness was successful. This service-learning project opened new doors to unexplored global opportunities from the confines of our homes in the middle of Indiana. We used the project to establish an intercultural network and to share knowledge acquired in the academic environment with local communities.

The concepts of identity, education, and global citizenship allowed our participants to envision themselves as leaders in their local communities and as global citizens that actively engage with the world in which

we live. This service-learning experience not only allowed everyone involved to reflect critically upon their own positionalities and responsibilities in today's interconnected world, but it also exemplified what global citizenship, according to Schattle (2009), entails: contributions to the political or social life of a community—in our case, Frankfort, Indiana, and the world.

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AUTHOR BIO SKETCHES

Jennifer Sdunzik is a doctoral candidate in American studies at Purdue University. Her research interests include hate crimes, racial violence, and sundown studies. Her dissertation focuses on the social construction

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