Ameliorating the Transition to University: Supporting First Year Students through Service-Learning in a Leadership Development Program

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Abstract

Transitions for first year university students have been identified as areas of concern when it comes to student retention, engagement, and success. With this, universities have sought to bridge the gap between secondary and tertiary education. The practice of service-learning, among other practices, has been used as an initiative for fostering conditions conducive to successful first year transitions (Keup, 2006). Building on a recently published article (Elnagar, Perry, and O'Steen, 2011), this Nuts and Bolts session will address how service-learning has been used in the design and development of the Emerging Leaders Development Program (ELDP) at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand. The ELDP is an example of a university initiative that has implemented service-learning, in accordance with other efforts, in order to help students develop greater leadership capacity, to engage them in their new university environment, and to assist in their transition to university.

Introduction: Service-learning, student engagement, and first year students

Service-learning

Throughout the development of the concept, service-learning has had many different definitions. To date there are over 165 definitions found in the service-learning literature (Stanton, 2009). These definitions seem to be only slightly varied in verbiage. For example, Stanton, Giles, and Cruz (1999) define service-learning as the process of integrating structured, intentional learning with public and community service. Furthermore, service-learning refers to a type of edification where students apply particular theories and in-class concepts to real life, hands-on situations (Furco, 2003). According to Ehrlich (2000) service-learning is closely tied to community engagement with an emphasis on assigned reflection. The common denominator among these definitions of service-learning is found in the pedagogy's reliance on learned theory, practiced in real life situations with the end goal of navigating the experiential learning process and self-reflection. For the purpose of this project, service-learning will be described as follows: a *reflective process* designed to intentionally involve the student in structured*, hands-on learning* opportunities within *communities* that solidify and correlate the *theories and concepts* taught in the *program curriculum* (Stanton et al., 1999; Furco, 2003; Ehrlich, 2000; Perry, 2007). The definition is focused around reflective, intentional hands-on learning opportunities that bridge the gap between theory and real life practice.

Over the past 50 years service-learning has been viewed by many different scholars from many different perspectives. Payne (1998) notes a resurgence of the concept and correlates

this resurgence directly to the increased awareness of service programs geared to promote the involvement and learning of community engagement. Prentice (2007) found that service-learning endeavors that are focused on the impact of individual service initiatives in community life would, at a minimum, foster the process and development of personally responsible citizens. Simons and Cleary (2006) found support for service-learning courses on learning, personal, and social outcomes for students. Researchers have been able to demonstrate that service-learners increased their political awareness, diversity attitudes, civic engagement, community self-efficacy, and affiliation preferences for community involvement through service-learning initiatives (Simons and Cleary, 2006). In a longitudinal study of over 22,000 college undergraduates, Astin, Vogelgesang, Ikeda, and Yee (2000) found that exposure to service-learning had a positive impact on students' academic performance, self-efficacy, leadership, choice of service career, participation in service in the future, values of activism, and promoting of racial understanding. These researchers have noted numerous positive attributes, characteristics and learning outcomes important to students in their journey of becoming engaged citizens in their community.

Service-learning and first year retention

Research shows that students' involvement in service-learning can have a positive impact on student retention (Keup, 2006; Eyler and Giles, 1999) or at least have a positive influence on the first year student experience and university environment (Barefoot, 2000). From a theoretical perspective, Tinto's student departure theory (1988) identifies "that effective retention and the involvement of individuals in the social and intellectual life of the college [university] are one and the same" (p. 453). Therefore, if service-learning is thoughtfully designed and implemented to enhance the first year student experience and involve students in it, positive outcomes are likely to occur.

This Nuts and Bolts presentation demonstrate how data collected about service-learning in a first year leadership development program informed the next iteration of the program to more effectively promote student interaction, collaborative learning, and student and community engagement.

Service-Learning in the Emerging Leaders Development Program (ELDP)

Building on the work by Elnagar, Perry, and O'Steen (2011), this Nuts and Bolts presentation will present research about service-learning in the Emerging Leaders Development Program (ELDP) at the University of Canterbury (UC) in Christchurch, New Zealand. The ELDP is an institutional innovation designed to assist with the first year transition while purposefully combining extra and co-curricular approaches to teaching, learning, engagement, and student transition and leadership development. It has been shown that the ELDP has effectively met both student and program expectations by combining first year experiences with leadership development (Elnagar, et al., 2011).

As noted in Elnagar et al. (2011), leadership skills are influenced by the day-to-day activities and conditions that add up to equal a student's university experience. Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt (1999) found that students can improve their leadership skills by participating in formalized, purposeful initiatives and suggested that the following are best practices for student leadership development initiatives:

- Leadership Workshops
- Mentoring Programmes
- Guest-Speakers
- Service/Community Volunteer Placement (p. 57)

Research shows how concentrated leadership development opportunities can develop leaders, get students *involved* in *doing* something with their peers, and in the case of UC, induct new students into the institutional mission of "preparing people to make a difference." Thus, a first year leadership program, like ELDP which has been designed to provide interactive and collaborative opportunities among students, appears to ameliorate the transition between secondary and university environments.

While all of the components of the ELDP are integral to the program and have been informed by research (Eich, 2008; Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt, 1999), the fourth bulleted practice of Service/Community Volunteer Placement is the focus for this session. In 2010 service-learning, as a component of ELDP, was implemented in an extracurricular capacity. The students worked in groups of 5-6 and identified areas of concern within the community. They then worked with local not-for-profits to assist in the development and implementation of a solution. The service component of the ELDP was supported by reflection sessions held throughout the year. Lessons learned from this iteration influenced changes for 2011 ELDP.

Research on service-learning in the ELDP

Community service involvement preference inventory (CSIPI)
Service-learning not only addresses how to act, but also addresses understanding why to act. Payne (1998) refers to the why to act as a "…unique and expected outcome of the educational process" (p.1). Payne (1998) refers to the relationship between active experience, cognition, and psychosocial development as the philosophical and theoretical foundation for the pedagogy of service-learning. Through extensive research, Payne (1998) correlates the four following preferences for community involvement through affective, behavioral, and cognitive dimensions: exploration, affiliation, experimentation, and assimilation. For this presentation, service-learning is viewed through the lens of the previous definition and the paradigm from Payne's preferences for community involvement (see Table 1).

Preference (from least to greatest)	Cognitive Dimension	Behavioural Dimension	Affective Dimension
Exploration	reflects the individuals desire to learn more about themselves	sporadic, convenient, and typically short term in the life of the engaged	apprehension of new, uncharted territory of service in the community
Affiliation	increased awareness of more social issues and concerns	group related initiatives & subliminal motivation of recognition	the feeling of engagement with peers and team driven situations
Experimentation	learns more about the cause/people working for & develop a deeper cognition of how to empower others	is congruent with spending more time with a specific issue and face-to-face interaction	reflects the feeling of making a difference in the lives of others
Assimilation	awareness of career & lifestyle decisions & what it means to be a responsible citizen	actively get others involved in the community through action	identifies deeper commitments and concern to the causes they are involved

Source: Payne 1998; Simons and Cleary, 2006

Table 1. An overview: Community service involvement preference inventory (CSIPI).

At the conclusion of the ELDP in 2010, the Service/Community Volunteer Placement component was identified by students through both quantitative and qualitative measures as an area that needed further development (see Table 2). The lack of a significant difference in students mean scores indicated that they left the program no more inclined to perform community service than when they entered. Insights from the students' feedback will be further explored in this session as a way to see how service-learning can be used most effectively with first year students. The CSIPI indicated that students' preference for types of service and the amount of time and effort invested in service did not shift throughout the 2010 ELDP year. This issue has been tended to by restructuring the service component of ELDP.

Exploration PRE	Exploration POST	sig. (2-tailed)
35	34	0.417
Affiliation PRE	**Affiliation POST**	
38	38	0.565
Experimentation PRE	**Experimentation POST**	
44	45	0.454
Assimilation PRE	**Assimilation POST**	
41	41	0.611

Table 2. Results from the administration of the community service involvement preference inventory (CSIPI, Payne, 1998) to 2010 ELDP students.

When student-to-student/staff interactions are facilitated in a collaborative manner on service projects that are recognized as being worthwhile and valuable by the students working on them, and there is a formalized reflection process involved, then service-learning can create conditions for students to become more engaged and ultimately retained. In the previous sections, service-learning was addressed as a valuable initiative for engaging students and as a co-curricular initiative, which assists with the first year transition. After presenting information on service-learning and how it can influence student perspectives, experiences, and involvement an overview of the Nuts and Bolts session structure, plan, key questions, and impact of innovations will be addressed.

Nuts and bolts session structure, plan, key questions, and impact of innovation

This Nuts and Bolts session will be structured by key questions. Answers to these questions will be discussed in context of relevant research and literature, first hand experiences from the ELDP Coordinator (Lane Perry), and by drawing on the experiences of session participants through facilitated dialogue.

- What sorts of initiatives, practices, and activities can universities implement in order to create conditions conducive for student retention, engagement, and success?
- What role should universities play in developing students' leadership potential?
- Does the ELDP facilitated at the University of Canterbury seem to consist of practices that bring about conditions for successful first year student transitions?
- What elements of the ELDP are innovative in meeting its purpose of student leadership development and first year student transition?
- What are the 'take-aways' that could be transferred to other university's respective environments?

Using the ELDP as a practical initiative and framing it as a source for answering the previously identified questions, participants will experience an interactive presentation with practical and actionable advice. Impacts of this particular innovation within extra and co-curricular practices are presented in 'corollary lessons' and consequently may be transferred to other universities. Examples of lessons learned are demonstrated in these corollaries.

> "*Corollary 1.* From the social and academic side of integration, having a group of familiar people on a university campus can help students with their transition from secondary to university life.
> *Corollary 2.* Learning opportunities, in an extra or co-curricular capacity with a team element, serve as sources for interaction among students, and this is a valuable method for fostering student growth, engagement, and integration.
> *Corollary 3.* With regard to the previous corollaries, leadership skills can be developed and enhanced during undergraduate students' time at university, and a formalized, purposive emphasis on this development serves as a means to this end" (Elnagar et al., 2011, p. 61).

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