Grassroots Community Leadership Think Tank 2013-14

Report

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The Grassroots Community Leadership Think Tank offered Honors students an experience in deep community engagement by giving them the opportunity to explore important issues of civic engagement and community change side-by-side with community members living in neighborhoods on the west side of Salt Lake City. In a broader societal context that shows steep declines in civic participation among ordinary citizens, these Think Tank students tackled questions including, "What does it take to get people from deeply different backgrounds to work together to improve their communities?" "How do people come to agree on a shared goal or purpose, and what can ordinary people do to keep others involved so that real change is possible?" Over the course of two semesters, students explored these questions through participation in the Westside Leadership Institute, and then implemented concrete, community-based projects developed with their teams as a way to offer some answers. The outcomes of this Think Tank are thus not limited to the learning outcomes of the students themselves: they include the outcomes of the projects and the positive impact they've had on the community members and their neighborhoods. And to broaden the visibility of those projects, each team created a short video about their work that can be used both for advocacy and to generate more support for their work.

Fall Semester 2013

Our approach in this Think Tank was to bring Honors students into working teams with community members though a community-based initiative called the Westside Leadership Institute (WLI), which fosters leadership skills among ordinary west side residents to become catalysts for positive change in their communities. The WLI met every Tuesday evening for 14 weeks, and took participants through a curriculum that addressed both theoretical approaches to leadership and very concrete tools for getting groups together.   The WLI group (comprising 17 community members and 5 Honors students) divided into four teams of 4-6 members each. Each team identified a different pressing issue in the community that the participants were passionate about and had brought them to the WLI in the first place: increasing information and services for mental health issues in the Latino community; creating a space for dialogue about intergenerational conflicts in Pacific Islander communities that lead to alienation of

youth; increasing civic participation in the Rose Park neighborhood; and generating greater use and sense of ownership of the Jordan River Parkway by local youth and families.   Throughout Fall semester each group applied the topics explored in the WLI to the development of an action plan for a specific project intended to address the community issue they identified.

The WLI emphasizes a range of competencies as learning outcomes for the first semester. Students were expected to master core concepts underlying *adaptive leadership* approaches developed by faculty at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. The most basic of these involves identifying the difference between, and different roles of, *technical* solutions to problems ('above the neck' solutions) and *adaptive* solutions ('below the neck' approaches that require changes in norms, behavior, values, and deeply held emotional responses of stakeholders).

The WLI approach to community leadership starts by redefining 'leadership' from that of a noun or a position to that of action—leadership emerges from what one does to mobilize others effectively.   Most importantly, it arises from the recognition that any real change is going to require someone to change the way they think and act, and change is difficult. Participants thus spend a great deal of time learning how to 'diagnose' a community problem, so that they correctly identify what the real problem is, and who or what needs to change in order to improve the situation. Participants also focused on tools for organizing their groups— an action plan that requires research into other existing community resources, how to manage conflict in groups, identifying strategies for adaptive change, gaining visibility and funding, and others, all of which serve to move a group forward toward a shared purpose.   Honors students were given the additional task of relating their WLI work to adaptive principles each week through their journals, in which they reflected on the 'below the neck' experiences of working on a particular issue that week with their team.

The WLI invited a range of guest speakers to share their expertise, including representatives from the SLC Mayor's Office on 'working with local government', experts on non-profit fund-raising for the grant-writing module, community partner staff on using social media to gain a following, and a local non-profit director on identifying and valuing different leadership styles among team members.

Spring Semester 2014

The second semester focused on the implementation of the projects the 4 teams had developed. Honors students were expected to maintain regular communication with their teams, move forward on their action plans, create a video documenting the work of their teams, and implement whatever part of the project was achievable in the time frame.

Project descriptions and outcomes:

1. NAMI Latino [Latino Behavioral Health Services]: this group was connected to previous WLI participants who are trying to work with a local mental health organization (NAMI Utah) to increase the information and services available in culturally appropriate forms to Latino communities. They met with various forms of resistance from existing resources, and the great outcome of the WLI team was to create their own independent organization, Latino Behavioral Health Services, which conducted 4 different training workshops for Spanish-speaking support groups, and produced translated materials and curriculum for those workshops. The team met regularly to address it's organizational challenges, strategies, and resources. The 2 Honors students with this team, both of whom spoke Spanish, got a real-world understanding of the challenges facing underserved populations as they try to access mainstream services.

2. Jordan River Parkway Community Initiative: this group included a local parent and youth group organizer, a staff member from a local community center (The Sorenson Unity Center), and a resident interested in political advocacy. Together they developed a plan to organize a series of Saturday-morning clean-ups along the Jordan River Parkway with the goal of generating interest and involvement among some neighborhood families to use the Parkway more. The Sorenson Unity Center staff person will build on these cleanups by engaging the youth in summer 'camp' activities along the river, including canoe rides, environmental studies and cleanups. Unfortunately the Honors student working with this team had to withdraw for personal reasons, but a WLI instructor continued to work with and document this projects.

3. PolyMovement: this team included community members of both Tongan and Samoan origins, who developed a plan to create several short YouTube videos, based on cultural humor, to depict the intergenerational communication gaps between older residents born in the Islands and younger people born here in the US. Their assessment was that often the 'guidance' offered to the youth here is not relevant to the issues those youth actually face, with the result that young people turn to other sources, notably gangs, for community and structure. Their goal was to create a starting point for community dialogues that could help young and old work together more effectively. By the end of the course this group was in the editing process of their first video, and had created a website to bring together information on a range of businesses run by Pacific Islanders. This team learned a great deal about the struggle to keep group members involved, and what to do when a small few shoulder the bulk of the work.

4. I 'heart' Rose Park: this group was composed of members of the Rose Park Community Council and 3 other community members. Their goals was to bring more people into the communication loop for getting involved in Rose Park community affairs, and they decided to use the process of creating a Rose Park directory as a means to reach out to new communities. This group focused on challenges of creating a clear sense of

purpose, and struggled to find a project that would excite all members enough to keep them involved. The directory project is in process, and is being taken over by the Rose Park Community Council now that the WLI is over.

Finally, we spent the second half of the Spring semester making a brief video about each team and it's project, in an effort to create a product that would be useful to the teams themselves to get others involved and advocate for themselves and their work. Honors students learned interview ethics, methods, and techniques, and video and editing skills.   The staff of the Marriott Digital Scholarship Lab spent countless hours with us training us to use Adobe Premier to edit the video each team shot. When the videos were complete, we reached out to yet another partner, the Mapping SLC project (run out of the Dept of English at the U of U) which collects stories and images of important people, places, and events around Salt Lake City. The Think Tank videos are now permanently housed on their own page of the Mapping SLC website, to document the vibrant community work, and active community members, whose stories are so important to learn from. These videos can be found at : www. mappingslc.org or http://www.mappingslc.org/interview/item/192-westside-leadership-series

In the end, the year-long Think Tank structure allowed these Honors students to have an engaged learning experience few university courses can—the opportunity to develop meaningful, long-term relationships with community members struggling with the very problems the students were trying to understand, and a bridge from theory to on-the-ground learning that will stay with them for many years.