

“Don’t Cry No More” – The Next Generation of Women’s Leadership is Rising

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Abstract

The purpose of this presentation brief is to describe the model of program development, implementation, and early results of an alumnae supported Women’s Leadership Initiative in the College of Health & Human Development at Penn State University. The purpose of the WLI is to create opportunities for female students to observe, interact with, and learn from outstanding established leaders, as well as facilitate the process of developing philosophies and individualized plans for becoming tomorrow’s leaders. Students are emerging from the initiative with an enhanced knowledge of their own leadership capacity, an ability to identify and develop the leadership capacity of others, an understanding of the key dimensions of leadership in diverse cultures and contexts, and expanded networks with alumnae leaders.

Introduction

“What is the College doing to develop the leadership capacity of women students?” alumna Amy DiGesio asked Dean Raymond Coward in a introductory visit before he began his tenure as Dean of the College of Health & Human Development at Penn State University. Amy’s question and the focused attention of the Dean inspired a meeting of the minds that included five of the College’s most successful female alumnae. During that strategy session, the Women’s Leadership Initiative was conceptualized, based upon alumnae contributions and a model that would involve connections across the campus, community, and beyond.

The purpose of this presentation is to describe the model of program development, implementation, and early results of the Women’s Leadership Initiative in the College of Health & Human Development at Penn State University, with the intent to foster similar programs where possible. Following this discussion, the participant will be able to

- a) Describe the development of a student-oriented leadership initiative focused on early professional career advancement.
- b) Identify and engage alumni as a source of operational and programmatic support.
- c) Outline the benefits of a student-focused professional leadership development initiative housed in an academic unit.

Background

In early 2002, five alumnae, the Dean and Development Officer gathered at the Waldorf Astoria to think, plan, and share the makings of the initiative. Over the next year, several small steps were taken to bring the initiative into reality, but already full dance cards kept the focused work in other directions. In early 2003, with external funds identified for start-up of new initiatives, a

Director was employed to fully focus upon developing and implementing an innovative leadership development program for women students in the College.

That was January, and after some fast, focused, furious “soft shoe”, we had enough faculty and alumnae support to create an advisory committee, develop a program model, market a program, and in April, recruit 34 women, 3rd year students, majoring in the various disciplines of HHD.

How it works

The program model looks like this:

**Outcomes Model
Women’s Leadership Initiative**

For Whom Impact	Assumptions	Process	Outcomes
women HHD improved majors w/ career leader junior standing outcomes for	student-centered initiative more female leaders needed	students recruited expertise & skills are shared, devped., practiced	inc. leadership knowledge inc. leadership application
women HHD graduates alums in leadership roles	leadership can be taught university setting is appropriate environment for learning leadership	alumni recruited mentor preparation networks established collaboration with established leader- ship endeavors	defined philos. leadership style developing inc. networks inc. lifelong learning inc. mentoring inc. early alumni activity

As you can see, the model is heavily based in alumnae support and development, which comes through the work of the Dean, two Development Officers, the program Director, and the Alumni Director. First, we are all talking about the program and developing and expanding relationships

with alumnae. When you begin as a home economics unit, you have lots of women alums who are looking for ways to “give back”. Those focused discussions about the WLI are providing an opportunity to do just that in specific ways that will contribute to the development of the next generation of women leaders.

Results to Date

At mid-year evaluation, 80% of the students rated the WLI experience as excellent, and the remainder rated the experience as good. Participants reported that the most beneficial experiences in the program have been those that allow interaction and learning from women alumnae in programs and mentoring experiences, and those that foster self-knowledge and development of self-leadership, like the Myers Briggs Type Inventory and Analysis related to leadership of self and others. They overwhelmingly report an increased ability to network with others and an increased ability to speak up with the confidence and ability to listen generously. They have increased their understanding and valuing of diversity and are willing to take risks and opportunities to make differences and achieve goals for themselves and others.

Conclusions and Future Implications

We are ready for the last phase of the 12-month experience, which includes an applied leadership experience, completed in conjunction with whatever experience the student is already undertaking during the summer – internship, employment, study abroad, volunteer experience, etc. At that point we will evaluate the first year of implementation and continue as students have already requested with a WLI alumnae group that will allow these young women to continue to give direction to the program development, maintain newly developed networks, and mentor the next class of the WLI. Current participants already tell us that they plan to “give back” to the WLI just as soon as they can

Certainly our job is to develop evaluation techniques that will allow us to determine the difference the WLI is making in the lives and leadership of these young women 5 and 10 years from now and beyond. Our plan includes at least annual assessments of the participants and periodic assessments of their employers. We count on our alumnae in leadership to continue to guide the development and direction of the program. We most certainly are working toward continued alumnae funding with the help of the special projects committee of the College Development Council. The strength of our alumnae will continue to be the strength of the WLI.