

**Association of Leadership Educators
2008 Annual Conference
Call for Proposals**

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- 2) Leadership in Action!: A Practicum in Leadership Studies

- 3) Practice Paper

- 4) Experiential learning plays a critical role in leadership education. This session focuses on service-learning as a core course in the leadership studies minor at Middle Tennessee State University. The students' self-reflective essays reveal that this is the most valuable piece of the program as "leadership in action."

- 5) Please consider for poster session if paper is not accepted.

- 6) Deana Raffo, Assistant Professor in the Department of Speech and Theatre, coordinates the Leadership Studies minor at Middle Tennessee State University. Prior to her full-time teaching assignment, she served as Director of Leadership Development in Student Affairs where she spearheaded the effort with faculty to develop the interdisciplinary minor, now in its fourth year. She teaches the core course in the minor including Leadership Theories and Practices and the service-learning-based Leadership Studies Practicum. She earned her doctorate in Educational Leadership at Tennessee State University and her current professional interests focus on leadership and personal development and experiential learning in the leadership context.

- 7) Introduction
Experiential learning plays a critical role in leadership education. This session focuses on service-learning as a core course in the Leadership Studies Minor at Middle Tennessee State University.

This course is designed to provide MTSU students with the opportunity to enrich their respective classroom experiences by taking part in projects designed to promote community service and self-discovery. The focus of the course may vary according to the instructor, but all projects promote leadership, service, self-awareness, and discovery learning. As a multi-discipline endeavor, faculty from all colleges and departments are encouraged to develop both discipline-specific and broad-based initiatives.

Session participants will learn about one university's endeavor to incorporate students' leadership projects into a minor's curriculum that encourages students to focus on enhancing personal leadership development and understanding through campus- or community-based endeavors. It is anticipated that through the description of this program and the discussion that follows that participants will gain ideas on how to integrate experiential learning into a campus-wide leadership program that integrates curricular and co-curricular programs and learning.

Background

In *What Matters in College*, Astin (1993) addresses student leadership within the college experience. He asserts "increases in leadership are mostly strongly associated with student-student interaction" and notes that changes in leadership are associated with more involvement measures than any other single student outcome. In *Leadership Reconsidered*, Astin and Astin suggest that leadership development should be a critical part of college because it can enrich the undergraduate experience, empower students, and give them a greater sense of control over their lives. Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001) found that experiential learning and service learning are pedagogies that are very powerful for teaching students how to engage in the leadership process. These opportunities provide an environment which empowers students to mature and develop toward greater levels of leadership complexity, integration, and proficiency.

Description of the Practice

Course Objectives

The objective of the course is to offer MTSU students valuable leadership experiences in an atmosphere where their presence and efforts can fill a community or campus need. By emphasizing Komives, Lucas, & McMahon's (2006) definition of "leadership as a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good" in a community or campus setting, participating students can enrich their learning by approaching the campus and public communities as learning laboratories. Such enrichment will ultimately enable participating students to function as leaders and citizens with experience in how to integrate civic awareness and engagement into their academic and professional pursuits.

Through the Leadership Studies Practicum, students have a unique opportunity to participate in a project-based, interactive partnership with a community or campus entity while synthesizing leadership skills learned in other classes. These partnerships enable students to enrich their learning by approaching the campus and public communities as learning laboratories in which they gain hands-on experience in a field or occupation. This course also serves as a conduit for students to develop a deeper understanding of relational leadership, self-awareness and discovery by partnering with co-curricular leadership programs in Student Affairs. An enrichment course such as this enables these students to build on contexts and to develop leadership qualities.

Course Requirements

Students are required to participate in a project-based service-learning partnership with a campus or community entity. The projects themselves vary depending on partner needs and student interest, but each project produces an end product that reflects the input and effort of all participants. Each project has a stated goal and emphasizes the process of “leadership as a relational process of people together attempting to accomplish change or make a difference to benefit the common good” (Komives et al). In a final self-reflective essay, students discuss how their respective projects addressed the key elements of relational leadership: how their project empowered others, ethical considerations, intentionally with the process; having a purpose; and being inclusive of diverse individuals and ideas. The practicum is offered in variable credits (1-3) to allow for flexibility.

Learning Outcomes

The course learning objectives are as follows. Students will 1) participate in community- or campus-based project; 2) identify and describe elements of the relational leadership model as they relate to the project experience; and 3) evaluate personal leadership development and understanding through the project experience.

Course Activities

The course activities include:

- 1) In a leadership role, students must participate in a project- or program-based partnership with a campus or community entity. The projects themselves will vary depending on student interest.
- 2) Students must keep a journal and log of dates, times, and activities with any notes regarding insights, frustrations, self-discoveries, etc. with regards to leadership as prompted.
- 3) At mid-term, students must meet with the instructor to discuss progress, concerns, etc.
- 4) Upon the conclusion of the project or at the end of the semester, students must complete a self-reflective essay that discusses their project, how they experienced the key elements of relational leadership, and what they learned about themselves and leadership.

Evaluation Procedures

Students are required to complete a journal consisting of responses to specific prompts and reactions to their respective community-based projects. The sequence of journal entries is designed to encourage students to think in depth about things that are commonplace to them and to explore their experiences in greater depth. Their discoveries are then shaped into the final self-reflective essay. In this essay students discuss how their respective projects addressed the key elements of relational leadership: empowering others, being inclusive, being process oriented, being ethical, having a goal.

Students keep a journal documenting their classroom, preparation, and collaboration experiences. This journal records data for the self-reflective essay each student submits at the end of the term. Students are evaluated on the quality of their journals and self-reflective essays, their commitment to and participation in their respective Leadership Studies projects, and in other areas of class participation. Students receive a grade of either “Pass” or “Fail” in the class.

Results to Date

During the first year of transition from a generalized service-learning practicum to a leadership studies practicum, approximately 50 students have participated. Projects have varied from community-based service projects such as collecting pajamas for children at Vanderbilt Children's Hospital and organizing efforts at a local food bank to leadership roles on campus with offices such as Greek Life and Student Government. The overwhelming response to the course and the self-reflective essays reveal that students are eager to learn about leadership in a "real world" and that the practicum is the most valuable piece of the Leadership Studies minor as "leadership in action."

Conclusions & Recommendations

Ernest Boyer (1987), a leader in student-centered learning, foresaw that universities will need eventually to provide "a larger, more integrative vision of community in higher education, one that focuses not on the length of time students spend on campus, but on the quality of the encounter, and relates not only to social activities, but to the classroom, too." Indeed, Middle Tennessee State University's Academic Master Plan outlines the University's commitment to offer students and faculty community-based learning and teaching opportunities as an integral element to MTSU's desire to seek and promote excellence in three areas: notable academic quality, business and institutional partnerships, and a student-centered learning environment. This course may encompass all three of the Master Plan initiatives in a fashion that will ultimately benefit all parties involved. As one of the core courses in the Leadership Studies Minor, it supports the Academic Master Plan by creating a student-centered learning environment with an opportunity for community-based learning experiences that foster collaboration and partnerships by promoting the process of personal leadership development in an intentional and structured way. By taking on leadership roles in the co-curricular activities provided through Student Affairs, students have the opportunity to immerse themselves in leadership experiences and challenges while engaging in the experiential learning process.

While the Leadership Studies Practicum is considered a success in its first year, the opportunities to further develop and structure the experience abound. Recommendations for the course include participation of more faculty and student affairs administrators to provide not only more opportunities for students, but also to offer faculty an outlet for creative activities and partnerships to support their disciplines and student affairs administrators a way to integrate curricular and co-curricular learning. Other recommendations include developing an on-line forum where students may share their experiences and insights to add an element of collective wisdom to the experience.

References

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- Boyer, E. L. (1987). *College: The undergraduate experience in America*. New York: Harper & Row.

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