

Examining Synergies in a First-Year Leadership Development Course

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Issue: The Need for Leadership Development and Partnerships in the First Year

Although some literature on student and academic affairs collaborations exists (Guarasci, 2002; Gulley & Mullendore, 2014; Schmidt & Kaufman, 2007) it can be challenging to find concrete examples for building partnerships among student activities, special populations, and academic affairs in higher education. The literature mainly focuses on creating systemic and organizational change. At Iowa State University (ISU), there lacks a formalized first-year experience office, yet each academic college is challenged with creating first-year seminars for incoming students interested in studying in the college's respective majors. These first-year seminars are often times decentralized, focused on student's academic discipline, and have no consistent curriculum across the university. Therefore, there is little to no collaboration amongst academic departments and student affairs when designing and implementing first-year seminars, besides opportunities for guest speakers and highlighting student resources. At ISU, the most obvious area to create connections among leadership theories and to build important campus partnerships is within the classroom; specifically, in the first

year where supporting student transition to college is paramount (Komives, Mainella, Owen, Osteen, & Longerbeam, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

ISU's Leadership Studies Program (LSP), a program implemented in 2008 designed to enhance leadership skills during students' undergraduate studies, explored the areas of synergy between the classroom and other areas of development around campus using undergraduate leadership development theory models. The LSP at ISU felt strongly that encouraging success during the transition to college for first-year students requires a collaborative effort to create the synergies across campus units, specifically between student affairs and academic affairs. At ISU, our first-year students' successes are at stake when collaboration is omitted across campuses. Several unintended consequences can arise due to this lack of collaboration. For example, students may excel in academics but lack connections with peers; alternatively, they may increase their social presence, while not prioritizing their academics.

Strategies: LSP, Theoretical Models, Synergies, and Partnerships

Curriculum in the LSP at ISU is informed by a variety of theoretical models, including the Social Change Model (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996), the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives et al., 2005), and the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, 2013). The LSP at ISU intentionally designs and uses coursework in leadership education to support and promote thriving in college as we see many students experience isolation in their programs. For example, LSP qualitative assessments posit that Women in Science and Engineering (WiSE) and students of color report feeling seclusion in

their programs of study yet find their leadership courses supportive of their identity development.

The goal of first-year leadership education should be accessible to students early in their collegiate career. Efforts should be made to enroll students who are particularly at-risk of struggling or departing early from college. Supporting student services programs with leadership development activities is also key to maximizing shared goals for student success in first-year programming. The capacity of leadership studies classes to substantively shift students' likelihood of thriving in college should also inform the subpopulations of students we recruit to take courses in leadership. The students with strong leadership experiences in high school (e.g. team captain, valedictorian, yearbook editor) are coming in already with a high likelihood of thriving in college (Stephens & Beatty, 2015).

The established ISU campus collaborations with the LSP intend to focus on building key student-centered connections through (a) the Student Activities Office, (b) the Multicultural Student Affairs Office, (c) the Learning Communities Office, and (d) WiSE. These departments provide support to the majority of students that enroll in the LSP and in particular, the first-year courses offered at the university. Moreover, these departments' objectives focus on identity development, common curricula, and programming for first-year students.

Effective Strategies: The Campus Leadership Development Course

Responding to the necessity of increasing students' success in the LSP, faculty created partnerships with the departments aforementioned while

integrating a service-learning component (Figure 1) in CLPS 270. The partnerships connect department funding and support for students in CLPS 270, developed under the leadership frameworks previously discussed.

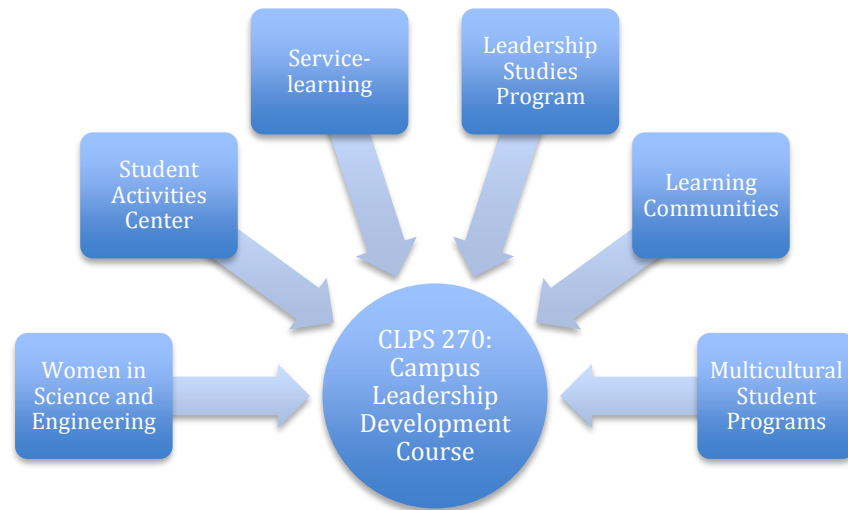


Figure 1 shows the multiple campus department synergies that create a holistic CLPS 270 course in the LSP.

Further the CLPS 270 course is housed in the LSP and is an interdisciplinary class targeted at incoming first-year students enrolling in the fall at ISU. Each college's advising unit assists in recruiting students in the course with a total enrollment of 60 students in fall 2015. Fall 2016 targets three specific learning communities (WiSE, Leadership ISU, and Exploring Careers, Education, and Leadership (EXCEL), anticipating over 100 students. CLPS 270 meets in a large lecture format one day a week with a LSP faculty member and the other class session is lead by peer mentors that facilitate smaller group discussions in 6 student clusters. To enhance the application of leadership theory, the course incorporates a service-learning project in which students work with a non-profit community agency for enhancing academic enrichment for lower income Iowa

youth. Students develop and implement academic programming for children during two site visits in the semester.

The course text, Kouzes and Posner's (2007), *The Leadership Challenge* is a central framework to the curriculum, student involvement, leadership development, and their understanding of the service-learning project at an individual and group level. The LSP and CLPS 270 course fosters an environment where students can apply their education and reflect on their experiences in the first year, leading to their persistence at the University. In Fall 2015, the course saw a 92.4% first- to second-year retention rate among the students enrolled in the course. Further, at the end of the course, students participated in focus groups to assess their experiences with the course and their leadership identity development. CLPS 270 focus group assessment indicates the greatest indicator of leadership for students is stronger identity as a leader after the course. The LSP faculty understands the increases in student confidence and persistence as student success and intends to expand the availability of service-learning into spring course offerings. The CLPS 270 course serves as a way to strengthen the synergies among campus partners to solidify one component of learning in the first-year experience. These departmental partnerships help to strengthen student leadership in not only one course, but also within their student organizations and first-year transition.

Implications and Future Directions

When new students identify and develop their abilities early, they learn to model individual healthy behaviors and to thrive in college. Leadership classes

such as CLPS 270 implemented early in the collegiate years will contribute to a successful transition to college. As the field of leadership studies expands, the focus needs to be on teaching advocacy and engagement early, especially the first semester, to enable students to guide themselves and their peers through college (Stephens & Beatty, 2015).

The CLPS 270 leadership course serves as a vehicle to create and maintain key campus partnerships at a large four-year university. Since there is not a formal first-year experience program at ISU, the course provides a bridge to first-year success. The CLPS 270 course assessment data signifies that it serves as an unintentional first-year transition class, building leadership skills in first-year students. Creating synergies across campus for the course, indicates the strength in connecting student resources to academics, reflecting on how their supportive departments further expand their knowledge outside the classroom, and provides unified connections to the University's overall mission. First-year students in the campus leadership course are more likely to use services, volunteer, and identify as global citizens. Moreover, with synergy already established in student affairs, students in CLPS 270 seek out leadership opportunities to apply their skills more often than those who did not enroll in the course.

After reviewing the positive increases in leadership identity of CLPS 270 students, it is evident that institutional support of academic and student affairs collaborations are necessary to ensure leadership development opportunities that enhance the college experience and persistence of first-year students. At

ISU, the course was an unintentional bridge to build strong synergies to support several first-year student subpopulations in their first-year at the university. The LSP understands our CLPS 270 course and program data as an indicator to increase course offerings and class sizes to answer the lack of formal first year experience programs at ISU.

Postsecondary institutions should consider implementing faculty development programs that foster these collaborations and enhance the leadership experiences of first-year students. Additionally, campus partners can be supportive in recruiting specific students who will benefit from experiencing courses that focus on leadership and student success (Stephens & Beatty, 2016). Partnerships and strong synergies across campus can play a key role in first-year student transition and offer opportunities for academic growth and personal development early on in the college career to maximize student success.



Students in the CLPS 270 course work with at-risk youth in an academic enrichment program during a site visit. Photo courtesy of Leadership Studies Program, Catt Center for Women and Politics, Iowa State University. Used with permission.

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