

# Promoting Student Engagement through an Academic Leadership Certificate Program

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## Abstract

The University of Georgia's Interdisciplinary Certificate in Leadership and Service is an undergraduate academic program designed to enhance college students' preparation for leadership in their communities and organizations through service-learning. This form of engagement with the community prepares students to face the technical and social challenges of the future through cross-disciplinary collaboration, scholarship, and application. The article discusses requirements of the certificate, the collaborative nature of the program across multiple colleges at the university, and the impact of institutionalizing leadership and service by providing a mechanism for both students and faculty to document activity in experiential education and its outcomes. The certificate program or any of its components can serve as a model for other colleges or leadership programs.

## Leadership for a Changing Environment

Dealing with today's business and societal concerns involves dealing with problems of human behavior, motivation, and personal values (*Kellogg Commission 1999*) rather than simply rote facts and data analysis. Management models efficient in mass-producing products during the industrial era are inadequate for dealing with issues of service, quality, and values (*Daft 2005; Nahavandi 2006*) that organizations currently face. Today, employees hold a large responsibility to represent their organization through customer service, direct sales, and personal interaction. Additionally, a global business environment finds people of all races, creeds, nationalities, and perspectives working together. Organizations must value diversity to attract talented individuals and have a broad mindset to thrive in a global environment (*Daft 2005*).

Many scholars view effective leadership as the ability to empower, create collaborative efforts, and share a vision in a relational process designed to bring about change (*Daft 2005; Kouzes and Posner 2002; Yukl 2002*). Leaders must be skilled in empowering employees and sharing power with those who need

it to perform their job functions (*Nahavandi 2006*). Leadership requires attention to innovation, systems thinking, and positive change (*Kamp 1999*); effective leaders create strategy (*Adair 2005*). Solving problems also requires the ability to see varying perspectives and arrive at solutions mutually agreeable to all stakeholders through collaboration and coalition building.

### **Increase in Leadership Development Programs**

Interest in leadership and leadership development has burgeoned in companies and organizations. Some experts in the field believe that leadership development is a critical activity for any organization (*Carter, Ulrich, and Goldsmith 2005; Adair 2005*). A shortage of talented leaders and employees ready to fill the gaps has caused companies to expend millions of dollars for leadership development programs to improve teamwork, conceptual thinking, systems thinking, and global perspectives. As programs of this type grow in number and magnitude, it is expected that expenditures for them will likewise increase (*Giber, Carter, and Goldsmith 2000*).

### **Need for Leadership Skills for College Graduates**

Numerous studies have shown that employers, alumni, and students nationwide recognize the need for leadership development as an employment skill. Alumni from the University of Georgia (*College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences 1998*) and Texas A&M (*1998*) indicated that skills in people interactions, communication, problem solving and conflict management, higher thinking skills/critical thinking, teamwork, and leadership were related to professional success, and that their undergraduate experience was lacking in providing real-life situations in the classroom to address the need for these skills. Employers also supported the need for skills in communication, problem solving, and teamwork, as reported in studies by the University of Nebraska and Pennsylvania State University (*Andelt, Barrett, and Bosshamer 1997; Radhakrishna and Bruening 1994*).

### **Role of Higher Education in Leadership Development**

To respond effectively to the concerns of society, higher education must transform itself by providing opportunities in leadership (*Wisniewski 1999*). In order for institutions of higher education to provide society-ready graduates, they must consider

new approaches to leadership development which are at the margin of institutional life—that is, programs that exist in isolated departments without institutional support (*Morrill and Roush 1991*). Colleges and universities have become experts at preparing specialists, but they have not given students the means to link discrete bodies of knowledge. The educational experience must enable students to deal with complex issues in an effective way, which often requires thought and collaboration outside the boundaries of a particular discipline (*Langone 1999*). The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999) stated that society has problems, while institutions have disciplines that are not well organized to address society's problems in a coherent way. Higher education must develop an integrative curriculum that draws from both disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches (*Boyer Commission 1998; Morrill and Roush 1991*). In addition, institutions of higher education are increasingly being called upon to encourage civic participation and thus to foster responsible citizenship in our communities (*Colby et al. 2003; Musli 2003*). Courses in leadership development offer a comprehensive approach to such educational objectives.

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### Effective Leadership Development Programs

Programs that aspire to excellence in leadership education must make explicit, direct, and formal links between theory and practical experience, between knowing and doing (*Butin 2005; Dubrin 2004; Morrill and Roush 1991; Rogers 1992*). We must prepare individuals for diverse leadership roles throughout their lives, from formal to informal, in community, professional, and social enterprises (*McCauley and Van Velsor 2004*). To provide an interdisciplinary perspective, collaboration among multiple departments such as psychology, political science, and sociology creates programs with sound foundations (*Fritz and Brown 1998*), and modeling collaboration through assignments that require

collaboration and group work strengthens the learning experience. Programs should provide opportunities to reflect, solve problems, work in small groups, and engage in active learning experiences, simulations, and role playing (*Wisniewski 1999*). Courses in leadership offer unparalleled opportunity for including application and practical experience (*Langone 2000*). Sheckley and Weil describe the reality of many classrooms as “experiential deserts” (1994, 7) where knowledge cannot be cultivated. Active learning helps students transform knowledge and deepen understanding (*Cross 1998*) in the context of a compelling “presenting problem” (*Ewell 1997; Gordon 2000*) where students apply established concepts to new situations and discover relationships, connections, and patterns that become new knowledge.

Experiential education such as internships, action research, community service, and service-learning can expand the learning environment from the classroom to the community through content-based activity designed to achieve preexisting course objectives (*Morton 1996*). Courses that include a service element are associated with increased understanding of problems facing the nation; a positive effect on sense of civic responsibility and commitment to helping others (*Astin and Sax 1998; Barkley 1999*); improved academic achievement and leadership ability; and enhanced interpersonal and community engagement (*Gallini and Moely 2003*). They provide experience in working cooperatively, thinking critically, resolving conflicts, and getting along with people of different races or cultures (*Astin, Sax, and Avalos 1999; Barkley 1999*).

### Development of an Academic Certificate Program

The Interdisciplinary Certificate in Leadership and Service (ICLS) is one institution’s response to these concerns. It provides an approach that embodies an integrative model of leadership and service aimed at preparing students for the challenges of leadership in professions and communities. The ICLS represents a unique and innovative approach to the need for higher education to incorporate interdisciplinary leadership development; it seeks to strengthen the quality of education through its interdisciplinary, collaborative approach.

The ICLS is an academic program for undergraduate students at all levels in any major. The program requirements are similar to those for completing a minor, but with courses taken in multiple departments. The requirements are in addition to the student’s

major; however, through careful planning students often can use major requirements, core curriculum, or electives to cover the ICLS requirements.

**Requirements:** The certificate requires completion of eighteen hours of coursework, including:

- **Leadership and Service (3 hours):** The required foundation course covering core leadership concepts taught from an interdisciplinary perspective. A major focus of the course is on designing and implementing a team service project, which is described in depth in the next section.
- **Directed project or internship (3 hours):** Students individually apply leadership and service skills in a real-world setting under the direction of a faculty advisor.
- **Electives (12 hours):** Courses that support the conceptual foundations of leadership and service, in such subject areas as psychology, sociology, management, advanced leadership, communication, and political science. Examples include Sociology of Organizations, Understanding Cultural Diversity, Advanced Public Communication, and Oral Decision Making.

**Student community engagement:** In keeping with program objectives to develop and practice leadership skills in strategic planning, creating needed change, communication, valuing diversity, and working in teams, students plan and carry out a community service project in which they apply these skills. The focus of the project is on developing the concept of citizen leadership, which means using leadership skills to contribute to a community to enhance the quality of living (*Langone 2004*). The community can be a geographic community such as the county or university, or a virtual community such as a community of environmentalists or political activists. Work may be performed independently or under the aegis of an existing agency such as the Red Cross, Boys and Girls Clubs, or Habitat for Humanity.

Students are assigned to teams of four to five. Each team defines its community, then conducts a needs assessment to determine what problem or concern to address. These groups target an array of issues based on the identified needs and team members' interests and skills. Background research to better

understand the problem area is conducted. The team then creates a vision that provides a guide or sense of direction for action. Specific goals for the project are set, along with a time line (plan of work). Each team carries out its project, and then multiple questions are used to evaluate the impact of their actions as well as the effectiveness of the team process. Representative projects conducted over the past three years include

- **Senior Citizen Care:** Addressed needs related to nutrition and loneliness: (1) volunteered to deliver meals with Meals On Wheels; (2) solicited donations of fruit from local grocery stores and delivered packages to a nursing home combined with a visit with residents; (3) visited a senior day care facility with planned activities and companionship.
- **Alcohol Awareness:** Conducted educational seminars for university dorm residents.
- **Children with Disabilities:** Prepared educational materials for blind children, which were delivered to a children's hospital.
- **Environmental Issues:** Supported efforts of local nature center and park through trail maintenance and construction.
- **Historic Preservation:** Painting and maintenance on antebellum mansion.
- **Homelessness and Hunger:** Prepared Thanksgiving meal for needy family, supplied meals at local homeless shelter, conducted a food drive to contribute to local food bank.
- **Health Care:** Fund raising, volunteer support for Relay for Life, a major fund raiser and educational effort of the American Cancer Society; blood drives for Red Cross.

These team service projects take seven to eight weeks to implement. Less time would be required if the whole class worked with an established agency rather than each group selecting its own project. For the leadership class, however, the needs assessment and project selection are a critical part of learning to lead.

***Key features of the certificate program:*** The program was initiated by the College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, yet it is a collaborative effort among numerous colleges and units at the University of Georgia. Such collaboration

strengthens the program and provides a model to students for collaborative work relationships. An advisory committee consisting of faculty and administrators from four colleges and the Department of Student Activities provided input as the program was developed and implemented. Over thirty-five additional faculty in related disciplines throughout the university contribute to the project through courses listed on the ICLS curriculum. The courses for the certificate include students from multiple majors and disciplines, thus providing a class environment that simulates the real-world work environment for which they are preparing themselves. Additional innovative features are the focus on experiential learning—a key component of the required foundation class and the certificate as a whole—student reflection on group and service experiences, use of personal and team assessment tools, portfolio development, and the inclusion of discipline-based courses that combine subject matter content with experiential or leadership learning.

The Interdisciplinary Certificate in Leadership and Service offers a mechanism to document student accomplishments in leadership and service through graded coursework and acknowledgment on their transcripts. Such institutionalization of academic pursuits in leadership and service has brought recognition to the University of Georgia as a leader in providing and promoting interdisciplinary efforts and obtaining resources for program growth and development. The University of Georgia program has served as a model for other colleges and universities within the state and nation. The program promotes interaction with community agencies and businesses through required experiential learning projects and cooperative activities with business and industry.

According to Furco (2002), institutionalization of service-learning requires support from the institution's mission. The University of Georgia assigns high priority to the development and implementation of programs such as the ICLS, as indicated by its Strategic Plan (*UGA Office of Vice President for Academic Affairs 2001*), which states that leadership development for undergraduate students is critically needed to address key areas of an improved workforce, continued economic development, the challenges of globalization, and the task of building successful communities. The ICLS has been approved by the University Council and the Board of Regents governing the University of Georgia, which document its value and potential to be an



enduring program, another feature indicated by Furco (2002). The University of Georgia College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences and its collaborating partners have committed redirection of faculty time and resources to support the program. The program supports the university's goals of providing broadened educational programs to provide a well-rounded education and the basis for life-long learning skills and to enhance the society-readiness of undergraduates.

### Program Outcomes

Students may participate in any individual course in the program. Since 2001, over 375 students have taken one or more courses in the program. At any given time, about 30–35 students are enrolled in the entire ICLS program with the goal of completing the 18 required hours. The 28 students who have completed the program received a framed certificate, and the notation "Certificate in Leadership and Service" was added to their transcripts.

Students who have gone for job interviews repeatedly say that employers are impressed by their participation in the program and are very interested to learn that the university is promoting leadership and service. As previously mentioned, the program has served as a model for implementation of similar programs in colleges both in the state and nation.

A major program impact is the community service provided by students. Over one hundred team and individual projects have been implemented. Numerous community agencies have received countless hours of service through projects such as those listed above. Many projects continue to have impact through continued service. For example, one group collected books to be donated to the homeless shelter. This physical product can be used repeatedly. Students who provide trail maintenance and beautification at the botanical garden and nature center impact the many individuals and groups for months after the service is performed.

Evaluation and reflection are critical to the process of developing leadership and fostering personal growth from service-learning activities. Reflection is the process of stepping back to ask oneself what has happened and the meaning of the action and results (Komives, Lucas, and McMahon 1998). Students consider questions such as: Did you reach your goals? What helped or hindered reaching the goals (related to team process,



the task, or other factors)? If you were to do this project again, what, if anything, would you do differently? With changes, is the project worth doing again? How were the recipients or clients of your work affected? How do you know? What impact did your efforts have? How did working as a team affect the impact (as compared to an individual acting alone)? How might the impact be increased? What people, resources, time, or effort would be needed? Through evaluation and critical reflection on the process, program, team process, and individual member contributions, students internalize concepts and learn from their experience.

Students are increasingly becoming involved in service activities, and most students find this comprehensive approach interesting and rewarding. They now see the application of leadership skills and the broader context of issues in communities and organizations. For some students, this project is their first effort at service and citizen leadership. Representative student comments concerning the program and projects include:

This project definitely helped me to grow as an individual, leader, and citizen. . . . I learned to take criticism as a positive tool towards helping myself be more effective.

As an individual, I was able to realize the potential I have to make a difference in the lives of people.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed this project because it was the most introspective and productive thing I have done so far this year. Projects that cause struggle make you stronger and this definitely made me a stronger person.<sup>1</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Through integration of key concepts of leadership and service-learning, institutions of higher education can provide experiences that enhance the undergraduate educational experience and student preparedness for their professions and role as community citizens. The interdisciplinary certificate program provides a model for institutionalizing service-learning into the academic curriculum. Becoming engaged in the community as part of the college experience prepares students to

face the technical and social challenges of the future through cross-disciplinary collaboration, scholarship, and application; it also benefits the community. Students who have received the Interdisciplinary Certificate in Leadership and Service at the University of Georgia have benefited in terms of both personal development and employment potential. The program provides real-life experience needed to develop leadership skills essential for success.

### Endnote

1. Quotations are from course and program evaluation documents available from the author.

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