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Measuring the Impact of Youth Leadership Development
An Evaluation of Impacts
Prepared by
Heartland Center for Leadership Development
October 31, 2017

Introduction

The research purpose of this collaborative study is to develop a psychometrically sound measure of youth leadership and examine its relationship to community outcomes such as retention, civic engagement, entrepreneurial activity and community attachment. This program, entitled the Rural Civic Action Program (RCAP), is designed to engage undergraduate “fellows” with rural middle or high schools to facilitate a service learning project intended to address locally identified needs.

Findings

To evaluate the program, seven teachers participating in the UNL program over the course of the grant were interviewed. The interview questions consisted of 11 open-ended questions and five quantitative questions. Scaled question responses: 1 being extremely unsatisfied, 10 being extremely satisfied. Below are some selected examples from this survey.

How satisfied are you with the program’s enhancement of learning in your classroom?

- 8.7

How satisfied are you with the fellows work in your classroom?

- 9

How satisfied are you with the communication and support from Nebraskans for Civic Reform?

- 9.5

How satisfied are you with the amount of time you had to commit to engage in this program?

- 9

Overall, how satisfied are you with this program?

- 9.3

An additional qualitative protocol was designed to get teachers to address specific examples of the program and provide a narrative about service learning, the curriculum and changes experience by in students. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed to find emerging themes and identify patterns in the data.

Of the seven teachers interviewed, five noted that they had not used service learning (as defined in this project) as a teaching strategy prior to this project. Six of the teachers indicated that the service learning project made a connection to their classroom curriculum. This was accomplished in a variety of ways. One teacher discussed the role in community service and identifying assets and liabilities in a community and using the Gallup Strengths Finder to tie thing together. A couple of teachers addressed the role of leadership and what one teacher described as “habitudes” that cover good habits and servant leadership.

When asked if the students' service learning project served as a value added component to the course, the majority of the teachers stated that it did. The projects were identified by the students, and they had to collaborate, not just with each other but with adults in the community in order to accomplish their objectives.

When asked about what aspects of the project worked well, teachers remarked that the link between the kids, the project, the community and the university students was a success. The kids showed enthusiasm and really wanted to dive in and do something. The university students were easy to work with and were flexible in accommodating teacher schedules. The kids themselves learned to be flexible when they realized that something wasn't going to go the way they wanted and they had to come up with a different plan.

Besides overall praise for the project, teachers also offered various tidbits of advice to make the service learning project better in the future.

- Give the UNL students more guidance.
- Provide more time for project completion.

Participating teachers also offered additional insights to share with future teachers:

- It may take more time and effort but overall the investment is well worth it, especially when you see how the projects connect the students with the community.
- Another teacher saw it as a chance to get some added work time to accomplish other things that had been put off.
- Communication and scheduling with the college students is critical.

A couple of questions were specific to the fellows (UNL students) on what they did well and what could they have done better:

- They communicated very well, mostly using email, offering different angles or approaches.
- Fellows were excellent at demonstrating in every class period and linking that demonstration to an activity.
- Activities around civic learning and working in groups are a big hit and students show significant interest in those types of activities to a point where clubs were created that will continue to the next year.

For the most part, remarks about what the fellows could have done better were more complimentary than critical. There were a few suggestions, such as:

- Following through on a planned time and activities.
- Being realistic in what can be accomplished.

Summary and Conclusions

A lot of positive feedback was received from teachers, administrators and community members about the projects. In one instance, the gap between the community and 7th graders was improved as community members saw the middle school students as people who really cared about their community. Donations for projects across the schools increased and community

members have been using facilities that weren't utilized as much before. In one case, however, the school administration took the funds that were raised and put them in the general budget.

A final survey protocol was sent to selected teachers after the program ended asking the following questions:

- What about this program interested you?
- How did the RCAP project get the students to think about their community beyond the school?
- Is there anything specific to the program that you have added to your "toolkit" in your teaching?
- What suggestions do you have to improve the program?

(To date no responses to this survey have been returned.)

In addition, an interview was conducted with Amanda Barker, deputy executive director of Nebraskans for Civic Reform, which was a collaborating partner in the project. Amanda made numerous site visits during the course of the service learning projects. Her principal recommendation for program improvement was to get students and UNL fellows out of the classroom and into the community on more occasions. She suggested that students and fellows could do community walking tours together, conduct a community survey or community canvassing or perhaps even hold "community office hours" in a public library.

Barker also suggested that the service learning students might visit key community institutions to visit with adults other than their parents, such as nursing home residents, owners of main street businesses, senior center patrons or convenience store clerks. The point of these visits would be to encourage the students to think about community beyond their own school. She also recommended connecting with collaborating teachers earlier to explain service learning and to share information about past projects and how they impacted teachers, students and their communities.