

Project Summary
Service Leadership: The First Year Student Experience
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My project was a phenomenal capstone for my experience at URI. It challenged me and let me explore new areas of my field, while also allowing me to incorporate some of my long-standing passions and interests. I focused on incorporating service into a first-year class for the Leadership Studies minor. This fulfilled the needs of students as well as serving the community, and these helped me to accomplish my learning outcomes. I learned and grew throughout my experiences with the project, and came away with several key learning moments.

My project focused on reaching out to students in the Leadership Studies minor and identifying areas of improvement, such as concepts of social justice and leadership theory, and then incorporating those needs into various service projects to create a skeleton of a syllabus for a service learning class. I began by asking students in the Leadership Studies minor about their experiences in the minor, what they had learned, and what they felt they didn't know enough about. I used this to pull together a few specific needs, like having more seats in classes, learning more about social justice and service, and using experiential education to tie those concepts together. After addressing those concerns, I reached out to service organizations and asked them how they felt students could serve. There were many populations that needed service, specifically people of color, differently abled folks, women, children, and those living in poverty. Then, I developed a syllabus that pulled together different activities, service opportunities with various service organizations, and reading lists that would help students learn about social justice and leadership theories. Leadership and service were huge cornerstones of my own college career, so I sought a way to pull them together for other students. Service and reflection helps break down barriers of perspective, opinion, background, and lived experiences and instead think collaboratively and constructively with others.

I learned a lot from doing this project, but addressed specific learning outcomes. One learning outcome was assessing the needs of service organizations in Rhode Island. I did so through phone and email interviews with a varied list of service organizations and non-profits. I asked them all the same questions, addressing concerns about how they serve, what members of

the population they feel are under-served, and how they think a college student can be an active service member in their community. I used this information to compile a list of various ways college students can serve. Most focused on advocacy and visibility of different causes, but students could also serve as mentors or do clerical work to help free up those who are working for non-profits or service organizations to do more for the community. Service can often get misconstrued as just building houses or doing manual labor, and so it was important to convey this information to students that they can do service just by being an active citizen. Another learning outcome was organizing information and activities for students in class curriculum format. In other words, I learned how to construct a syllabus and identify what information is most important for students to know. I also partnered the information with various activities and service opportunities to incorporate an aspect of experiential education. Finally, I was able to understand the needs of students in the Leadership Studies minor. I did this through surveys of students as well as weaving my own experiences into my knowledge of the minor. By understanding and analyzing the needs of students, I could make sure those needs were addressed by my project.

Reaching out to students and service organizations opened so many doors and helped me to revitalize my passion for using service to teach others about leadership and social justice. I got to explain my path through the Leadership Studies minor and how I had learned about service, but didn't get a chance to experience it until my Classroom Without Borders service trip. Through this class, I learned about issues of social mobility and inequity, as well as how to serve a community through a social justice lens. As I talked to students in the minor and learned about what they need, I began to see that they wanted to feel included and purposeful. Adding another class allows all students who want to start the minor to begin taking classes, and doing so with a social justice lens means that students will start talking about important issues sooner. I also spoke to many service organizations and learned about how college students can stay involved, which got me thinking about how I can help college students get involved as I enter my professional career. I would like to incorporate service and social justice as I work with high-risk youth as a social worker. Doing this project helped me create a template for implementing that, and helped me review how valuable my learning in such areas was.

I had several key take-aways from this project. The first was how many ways a student can serve, and what the needs of service organizations are. There is always an opportunity for students to get involved that may not be what “typical” service looks like, so its especially important to advocate for this type of service and encourage students to get reach out to see the needs of organizations. I was also surprised to learn how important clerical work is for volunteers to do. This frees up others in the organization to focus on their work, and helps volunteers learn more about intake processes, ordering forms, and reaching out to others for support. My other key take-away was how valuable experiential education is in teaching different concepts. As I pieced my experiences with the experiences of students, I saw how I had learned the most through working with service organizations and then reflecting on the experience in order to understand it. Having that supplemented with academic information is what made the classes and seminars stick out to me and this was supported by other students who said that they learned best through activity. Developing a syllabus helped me break down and sequence service in a way that was tangible for new students, and forced me to look closely at how I taught students, rather than what.