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Learning Leadership Through Community Engagement: Exploring a New Undergraduate Major

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Abstract

The University of Colorado Boulder recently created a new undergraduate major in leadership and community engagement. This article describes the design process, key features, and challenges that have been involved with this initiative. The program is designed to offer a unique model of education for leadership through a reciprocal, community-based approach. Its goal is to help undergraduates develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to be effective, culturally responsive, and ethical agents of change. However, those involved in the project decenter this agency, positioning undergraduates as partners with rather than leaders of community.

In 2014 the School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder began exploring a new undergraduate major focused on leadership. Those involved in the project wanted to build on our strengths in learning sciences, educational foundations, leadership studies, and community-based teaching and research. Launched in fall 2017, the B.A. in leadership and community engagement (LCE) offers a unique model to education for leadership through a reciprocal, community-based approach. It is designed to help undergraduates develop a deep understanding of social change processes and fosters a form of leadership that catalyzes and sustains community development. Linking leadership studies to community engagement places a premium on students developing knowledge and skills to work with, learn from, and help build the capacities of ordinary citizens in collective efforts to engage complex systems. The emphasis on working with community distinguishes the degree from “leader-centric” programs (Kellerman, 2012). Rather than the typical division of leaders and followers, we re-frame followers as partners and collaborators. Our goal is to help undergraduates learn to be effective, culturally responsive, and ethical agents of change. We draw inspiration from Ella Baker and Myles Horton, who played instrumental roles in the civil rights movement but were often off-stage, focused on building the capacities among “ordinary” community members (Horton, 1998; Ransby, 2003). They represent an image of decentered leadership that facilitates and catalyzes, but does not direct, collective actions (Dugan, Turman, & Torrez, 2015; Fox & Fine, 2015).

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Our efforts to de-center leadership through community engagement raise an important set of tensions. As with any degree program, the main focus is to help students meet defined learning outcomes. We want students to have in-depth understandings of theories of leadership, research methods, the science of how people learn, and to develop skills and disposition as leaders. As such, it prioritizes the developmental processes of the individual student; it is student centered. For the community engagement elements of the major, we are committed to fostering reciprocal relationships that result in mutually beneficial outcomes. There is a very real prospect that undergraduates might not be the best agents to advance the mission of partners. Students are generally involved for shorter terms, within the confines of academic calendars, and often have a steep learning curve. There is an eternal recurrence of having to orient and train new students each year, and then they graduate. Moreover, university–community relations are saturated with power relations—economic, social, and epistemological (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). In constructing this major, we wanted to be explicit about these tensions and how we might negotiate the goals of undergraduates and communities.

This article describes the broader context that led the development of the major, its key curricular components, operational challenges, and its fundamental tensions. I hope that this discussion can be useful for those who are designing or working on similar academic programs and those who want to be attentive to the power dynamics in community engaged pedagogy.

Broader Context

There were three overlapping factors that led to the decision to propose this new major. The distinctive way in which these factors converged led to two organizing principles that helped us frame our curricular design. The first factor was declining enrollments. The School of Education at the University of Colorado Boulder has experienced the effects of a broad trend where fewer and fewer young people are going into teaching. Between 2010 and 2015, Colorado experienced a 25% drop statewide in enrollment in teacher preparation programs (Cole & Mitchell, 2017, p. 20). In planning how to address this challenge, the school developed a number of strategies, including strengthening recruitment, enhancing communications, increasing scholarships, as well as developing research–practice partnerships across the state. It also decided to create two new majors (elementary education and leadership and community engagement) to offer multiple pathways into education as a broad field.

Second, the LCE major meets the demand from students who seek to become leaders in addressing complex public challenges facing communities in the state of Colorado and beyond. An example of this demand on our campus is the leadership studies minor, which has grown from 50 students in 2014 to over 500 in 2017. In addition, we have observed rising interest from a specific subgroup of students in activism, social justice, and social change (Mitchell & Soria, 2016). The new major is aligned with CU Engage: Center for Community-Based Learning and Research. Across a wide variety of programs and experiences, CU Engage students are committed to causes beyond their resumes. This commitment reflects national trends in leadership education as well. Over the past 30 years, there has been exponential growth in academic programs, certificates, courses, and institutes (Diallo & Gerhardt, 2017, p. 93; Komives, 2011, p. 9).

A third factor centers on the current state of our democracy. Over the past 20 years, the political landscape has experienced growing polarization, disruption of democratic norms, information silos, and a coarsening of discourse. In the context of a world “out of joint,” the major is designed to

educate students to be a different kind of leader—more oriented towards working with diverse stakeholders to cocreate lasting solutions than partisan victories. This type of leadership is not flashy or performative but vital to re-knit the fabric of our democracy. We see this major is also part of the movement in higher education to engage the public in new and different ways (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009).

In designing the major, the organizing committee was explicit that the concept of *leadership* itself be used as a contested terrain. Two guiding principles organized the construction of the major. First, the major is designed to integrate critical perspectives of leadership. We are aware that growth in the number of leadership programs does not necessarily mean they are effective in fostering more ethical and effective leaders (Kellerman, 2012, p. 183). In addition to individual learning outcomes, a key metric of success is documented social change (when students and community partners participate in the design and assessment). More importantly, the curriculum centers on how leadership is implicated in reproducing social inequality. Students learn to recognize and “critique the power relations and identity constructions through which leadership dynamics are often reproduced, frequently rationalized, sometimes resisted and occasionally transformed” (Collinson, 2011, p. 181).

The second guiding principle is to teach leadership through a democratic approach to community engagement. Because our majors work with community partners in all four years of the major, we are mindful of the problematic history of some service-learning programs and university-community partnerships. At their worst, these reify conceptions of community, work from deficit perspectives and savior mentalities, and reproduce social inequality in the name of empowerment (Kirshner, Pacheco, Sifuentes, & Hildreth, 2018; Marullo & Edwards, 2000; Mitchell, 2008). Instead, we advance a democratic model of engagement in which students build on the funds of knowledge of community members, learn about local contexts, and are attentive to issues of reciprocity and mutuality (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992). In terms of contemporary literature, our approach resonates with group-centered (Fox & Fine, 2015) and capacity-building models of leadership (Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). We believe that these two principles help sharpen and distinguish our orientation to leadership. In the next section, I discuss how we operationalized these principles in designing the curriculum.

Curriculum Design

The prospect of creating a new degree program in leadership and community engagement was very exciting. The organizing committee also worked under a number of constraints around aligning the degree with school and university curriculum and requirements. In addition, as with any new program, we had to be attentive to the politics of the university. In this section, I describe the key components and learning goals of the LCE major.

Key Components

1. Four-year program: To align with the sister elementary education major and provide multiple pathways into the School of Education, the LCE major is designed as a four year-degree program. We recruit students from high school who are directly admitted into the program as first-year students. Students are part of a cohort where they take key courses together throughout college. During the initial roll-out of the major, we are starting small, with a maximum of 30 students in each cohort. The four-year

program also enables us to scaffold the curriculum into a developmental sequence and enable students to develop relationships with community partners over time.

2. Community-based experiences in each year of major: Each year of the program includes practicum experiences with community partners—largely schools and non-profit community organizations. Early placements help undergraduates learn about local contexts with community partners. As they progress through the major, they take on increasingly complex tasks, culminating in the year-long capstone, where they work in teams to collaborate with community partners to address complex public challenges.

3. Dual degree: Students are also required to enroll in a second related major in the College of Arts and Sciences. This experience enables them to ground their leadership knowledge and skills in a disciplinary area of expertise such as political science, sociology, geography, ethnic studies, or philosophy. Team projects are also built into the major, where students are expected to draw on their individual disciplinary expertise to contribute to a collective project.

Learning Outcomes

One of our first steps was to envision what our undergraduates would learn through this major and how it would position them to advance their post-graduate careers. Clearly defining outcomes provided the spine upon which we built the sequence courses and experiences. Learning goals can be understood in terms of four strands of expertise.

1. Theoretical foundations: Graduates of the LCE major are expected to have in-depth knowledge of the conceptual traditions and historical knowledge that community leaders need to facilitate complex change processes. One important foundation is leadership theory. Students are expected to understand the contested nature of leadership itself, evaluate competing theories, apply this knowledge in concrete work in communities, and develop their own theory of leadership. Learning about privilege, identity, oppression, and power is central to leadership theory. Because this major focuses on community engagement, remaining theoretical foundations draw on sociology, political science, and education to understand complex systems. The goal is that students will gain an understanding of political structures, economic systems, and historical forces that shape and constrain community development efforts as well as how human agency contributes to community development and social change.

2. Applied research and evaluation: Community organizations and public agencies are making data increasingly central to their decision making. This strand enables our graduates to step off the campus competent in quantitative, qualitative, and community-based research methods. They put this methodological training together in their senior capstone project, where they codevelop research projects and use data to facilitate and evaluate community change processes.

3. Learning in community settings: Students are expected to gain expertise in learning theory and human development. The organizational development literature is heavily invested in how people learn and how organizations learn. Fundamental principles of learning theory, such as how people learn through participation in the social practices of a community, how to ensure that organizational learning leverages the funds of knowledge of culturally, racially, and linguistically diverse participants, and how to design participation structures that invite collaboration and creative problem-solving, are central to community leadership (Sawyer, 2006). We view this strand as one of the signature features of this major that distinguishes it from other programs in leadership studies and pushes the field to recognize the importance

of learning theory to the production of leaders. Good leaders are also good facilitators and teachers—our students will stand out because of this part of their training.

4. Community leadership practice: Leadership education at its best integrates theoretical understanding, factual knowledge, and opportunities to try out ideas in the world of practice. There is a progression from more structured early experiences in community to more autonomy and student-led design. While still in development, we want to integrate the methods courses as components in a larger-scale research-practice partnership. Our work here is inspired by Steven McKay at the University of California Santa Cruz. McKay involves multiple iterations of a sociology on long-term research projects. Students are involved in surveys, oral histories, data analysis, geographic mapping, photo documentation, and data visualization (McKay, Espinoza, & Mora, 2015). So even though individual undergraduates cycle in and out of the project, the cumulative impact of this research becomes a vital tool for those working for social change. Because LCE has multiple methods courses, our intention is that students will be able to apply different methods to the same project and deepen their learning and relationships over time.

Our first class of LCE majors will graduate in spring 2021. We expect that they will be in high demand from employers and be well positioned to gain admission to selective graduate programs. They should be able to articulate the knowledge and skills they have gained through the major, how they applied these in developing and implementing their capstone project, and how they measured the impact of their work. All of this work is in the context of learning with and from communities and understanding how local change efforts are situated in broader structures of power. They should have developed an identity as a leader but also be reflexive and self-critical of how the very concept of leadership is implicated in systems of power and have insights into how they can resist these systems.

Operational Challenges

The School of Education is incredibly excited that this major is up and running. While we have only finished our first year, we have learned a great deal about the intended and unintended consequences of its design. The hope is that this discussion can help others who are thinking about constructing similar majors or programs.

One major challenge is that the degree program is credit heavy. The major had to incorporate School of Education requirements (11 credits), College of Arts and Sciences General Education requirements (34 credits), and a second major (30–42 credits), in addition to 38 credits for the major. The number of credits and structured curriculum limit the flexibility for students to take electives or enroll in minors or other curricular programs. In addition, dual degree and high credit requirements renders students in business, engineering, or natural sciences ineligible for the major.

Another challenge comes from the four-year degree program. Students choose the program when they apply to the University of Colorado at Boulder as high school students. Even though School of Education staff are directly involved in admitting students, it is difficult to anticipate who will actually matriculate. While we have honed our promotional materials and worked closely with admissions, we have found it difficult to communicate the full nature of our program to high school students. There has been some attrition as students realized that this major was not the right fit for them.

The third challenge arises from University of Colorado Boulder's history and current status as a predominantly White institution. Despite our recruitment and outreach to Students of Color, the first two cohorts have mirrored the demographic profile of CU with a high percentage of White and upper class students. This lack of diversity creates challenges in our partnership work. As stated previously, careful

study and self-reflection on privilege, identity, power, and oppression, as well as local contexts, are central features of the major. Nonetheless, the demographic composition of the major reinforces pre-conceived notions of University of Colorado students. It takes more time to build relationships and trust between students and community members.

We have invited our current students to help refine the major. They have provided valuable information about our promotional materials, recruitment, and curriculum. We have moved to reduce the credit hours and provide more flexibility while still maintaining a structured curriculum. We have revised promotional materials to provide a clearer articulation of requirements. Most importantly, we are nurturing our relationships with local high schools. This relationship building is already producing dividends as students are choosing CU Boulder and the LCE major based on their experiences with CU students in community engaged learning programs. Hopefully, these will reduce attrition and enable us to recruit students who more closely mirror the communities that we are working with.

Conclusions

This major offers a unique vision of learning leadership through community engagement. Students will graduate with a deep understanding of leadership and social change, methodological tools to measure social change, and diverse experiences working with communities. We have a strong moral commitment to reciprocity and mutual benefit in partnership. Community is not simply a site for undergraduates to learn but a place of authentic partnerships, cocreation, and collective work. This moral commitment can be in tension with the goals of undergraduate individual development. How do we structure experiences so that both community partners and students benefit? How do we overcome the fact that each new cohort starts anew in developing relationships and learning about community in order to engage in collective work with community? How do we both make explicit and address the real and perceived differences in the economy of knowledge and power between a university and community?

We start with the acknowledgement that these tensions can never be fully resolved. The power differences between universities and communities are embedded in social structures. Instead, we try to be clear about these tensions in setting expectations with students and community partners. Students and community partners are expected to be both teachers and learners (which itself is a tension). On a programmatic level, we plan to regularly evaluate these tensions with all stakeholders. Following the example of Steven McKay, we are in the process of developing larger-scale projects that students will tap into as part of their applied research courses. This development shifts the focus from students to partnerships. We also want to collaborate with different units in this social change work. By leveraging the combined strength of the university, in reciprocal partnership, we believe we can start to positively address the tension that is at the heart of university community relationships.

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