

# LEADING FEMINISM: HOW ACTION-LEARNING PLACEMENTS INFLUENCE STUDENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT AND ASPIRATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

A critical element of feminist pedagogy is empowerment, “teaching [students] to deal critically and creatively with reality and to learn to participate in transforming their world” (Middlecamp & Subramaniam, 1999). Synergies between feminist pedagogies and academic service learning (SL) are exemplified in Women's Studies (WS) SL courses.

Over 10,000 University of Michigan (U-M) students participated in SL in 2012 (Ginsberg, 2012). Research finds that students engaged in SL have higher grades, persistence rates, gains in reading and writing skills, and diversity and civic engagement (AAC&U, 2010). However, there is less research on how the structure of the SL experience impacts learning outcomes, especially for underrepresented students; and even less SL research done in the context of WS courses.

This project focuses on students in **WS350: WOMEN IN THE COMMUNITY**, a practicum course for WS concentrators.

### THE KEY RESEARCH QUESTIONS ARE:

- 1) WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SITE MENTOR'S ROLE IN THE ORGANIZATION AND THE STUDENT'S REPORTED LEARNING FROM THE SL EXPERIENCE?
- 2) WHAT IS THE ASSOCIATION BETWEEN THE TYPE OF WORK IN WHICH STUDENTS ENGAGED AND THE STUDENT'S REPORTED LEARNING FROM THE SL EXPERIENCE?
- 3) HOW DOES SERVING IN AN ORGANIZATION WITH EXPLICIT OR IMPLICIT FEMINIST GOALS IMPACT THE LEADERSHIP LEARNING OF WS STUDENTS?

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

During the 2012 Winter, Spring and Fall Terms, 63 students were enrolled in WS350: Women in the Community. In this course, students engaged in a 12-week service learning experience (4-week during Spring Term).

Service learning sites included those with **EXPLICIT** and **IMPLICIT** feminist goals:

#### EXPLICIT FEMINIST GOALS:

- American Friends Service Committee
- Eco Girls
- Girls & Boys Empowered-Kenya Relief
- Girls on the Run
- HIV/AIDS Resource Center
- Safe House
- Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center
- The Spectrum Center
- The Women's Center of Southeastern Michigan
- Women's Health Resource Center
- WTF Magazine

#### IMPLICIT FEMINIST GOALS:

- Ann Arbor Area Community Foundation
- Doulas Care
- Fair Housing Center
- Postering Futures
- Great Start Collaborative
- Tilian Farm
- Wayne County Department of Public Health

Students also took part in weekly classroom sessions to reflect on the experience and link to readings on nonprofit management, community engagement, and feminist practice.

Student **DEMOGRAPHICS** were gathered from Registrar data:

- 98% of students were female.
- 60% of students were white; 14% were Asian; and 20% were underrepresented minorities.

## SURVEY QUESTIONS

All 63 students completed a final self-assessment administered in the last week of class. While the survey addressed multiple issues about students' work in the course, the two questions analyzed here are:

To what degree do you feel your Women's Studies education has prepared you for:

1. Professional leadership roles?
2. Effective communication with others who may not share your Women's Studies background or feminist views?

The scale was 1-5, with 1=not at all and 5=extremely well.

## RESULTS

Students who reported more confidence to take on future professional leadership roles:

- Worked with mentors in leadership positions (e.g., manager or director)
- Completed an independent project (instead of or in addition to contributing to day-to-day organizational operations).

There was no difference in reported outcomes by the site's feminist goal orientation.



Students' confidence to communicate with others who do not share their views was generally high and did not vary by type of SL experience.



“[The director of the organization] was a wonderful supervisor. She gave us the reins to create our own internship and they valued our input. She was also 100% honest about the current state of the organization, and I learned a ton about its struggles.” ~Fall 2012 Student

“This type of [independent] project gave me a lot of ownership over my experience and made me feel as though the impact I was having on the organization was worthwhile. By focusing in on a special project I was able to learn more about the overall organization.” ~Fall 2012 Student

“I believe I got the best of both worlds because I got to be included in everyday happenings of the center but I also felt very lucky and learned a lot of just formulating the responsibility of larger scale projects.” ~Fall 2012 Student

## IMPLICATIONS

The results of Leading Feminism suggest that if leadership development is a desired learning outcome, it is most helpful to design service learning placements to allow students to:

- 1) be mentored by an organization's manager or director
- 2) engage in an independent project.

It is further suggested that students serving in organizations whose feminist goals are implicit have as valuable communication and leadership learning experiences as those serving in organizations whose goals are explicitly feminist.

These findings offer valuable insight for SL course development not only in WS, but may also have cross-disciplinary applications for SL course design; and suggest that “as higher education re-dedicates itself to its long-standing commitment to promote civic purposefulness at the core of the undergraduate experience, Women's Studies is a valuable resource” (Orr, 2011).

### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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