

The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program: Transformative Leadership in Action

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Transformative leaders are committed to values and outcomes that serve the long-term interests of society (Caldwell, Dixon, Floyd, Chaudoin, Post, & Cheokas, 2012). The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program is rooted in the premise that the transformation of self, required to become a transformative leader, can be supported through development of active and public identities of learner, ally, advocate, and activist through engagement in related behaviors and participation in Communities of Practice surrounding social justice causes. Students are nominated for the program, proceed through the application process, are interviewed, and are selected from throughout the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at North Carolina State University based on their (“their” will be used interchangeably in this manuscript as both a singular or plural pronoun) engagement in learner and ally identities and their interest in, and commitment to, issues of justice and equity. Included in this article are the program’s learning objectives, teaching component examples, evaluation results, and a description of future directions for the program.

Introduction and Issue Statement

Our world faces tremendous challenges of justice, equity, and liberation. Those challenges are evident in the United States as we become one of the most ethnically and religiously diverse countries in the world (Miller, Donner, & Frasier, 2004). “Due to historical legacies and current social realities, differences in power and privilege are manifest in diverse groups. In these dimensions diversity in the U[nited] S[tates] is not just a source of difference, but also a font of inequality” (Miller et al., 2004, p. 378). It becomes incumbent then that as a people, we create space to interface with each other in meaningful ways across and among these differences. Miller et al., (2004) noted that to avoid these conversations can lead to dire consequences that on a global scale include violence and war, and on a more localized scale include:

- “[T]he utilization of developmentally immature defense mechanisms” which including denial and projections like *I don’t see color* and *I don’t care if you’re gay*” (p. 379).
- Tension and anxiety leading to changing the subject to discount the importance of discussions by disavowing the social identity of others: *This is a class about leadership, not about race* (p. 380).
- “Reinforc[ing] the privilege of agents... *We hold people of color responsible for their mass incarceration* (p. 381)
- “Classroom climates of resistance, paralysis, rage...” leading to a lack of authenticity (pg. 382).

Several years ago, leadership faculty at North Carolina State University saw an increase in students in our leadership classrooms who wanted not only to talk

about these issues of inequality, but also to be a part of the solution to these pressing problems. Extending from these classroom discussions, an increase in students using faculty office hours to extend those conversations, and perhaps most exciting, students who expressed interest in being part of the solutions, our conversation began about what we might do as faculty to facilitate these discussions. However, an identification of need wasn’t enough to start a new program on campus.

While we were experiencing these interactions with our students, agricultural and natural resources related companies began acknowledging and identifying their own needs to confront issues of justice and equity. During this time, the numbers of those companies appearing on the Human Rights Campaign’s equality index with 100% ratings were increasing, and employers specifically began searching for employees (our college graduates) with the skills to be part of solutions that will transform our communities. It became clear that, beyond our seeing a need among students in the classroom, companies hiring our graduates were also declaring their need for employees with these skills and identities. As leadership educators who believe that in teaching leadership we are encouraging more just and equitable societies, we saw a way to create a space where students could intentionally discuss systems of inequality and put to use the skills of transformative leadership to be agents of positive change not tomorrow, but today. Thus, the Oaks Leadership Scholars Program (The Oaks) was born.

Review of Related Scholarship

Transformative Leaders

Transformative leaders are committed to values and outcomes that serve the long-term interests of

Figure 1
The student leader activist identity continuum

Learner	Ally	Advocate	Activist
Open to new experiences; curious; willing to hear and learn	Supports a group's rights & equality; shows up for individuals and groups experiencing marginalization; recognizes own privilege	Aims to influence others & public policy or resource decisions	Campaigns to bring about political and social change; organizes others to generate change
Listens, reads, observes, asks, believes; continues these behaviors throughout development of subsequent identities	Goes with an impacted person to an event or service; supports an individual or organization materially or emotionally; attends events, carries signs, wears the t-shirt	Engages in media campaigns; speaks or writes publicly, conducts research or polling and shares results, issues briefs; participates in phone banks/letter-writing/canvassing; donates or participates in fundraising	Lobbies; organizes fundraisers; organizes teams and events to address issues

society (Caldwell et al., 2012). As leadership faculty, we believe when using the skills of transformative leadership to confront the pressing issues of justice, equity, and liberation, individuals are on a continuum (figure 1) where they start with the identity of learner and work toward ever increasing active and visible identities (ally, advocate, activist). However, as students become aware of different justice issues and needs or changes within issues, the students can shift back and forth along the continuum. Pedagogically then, it makes sense to employ a project-based learning paradigm where students can engage in identities while confronting these issues in real world ways. While students take these journeys and develop skills and identities, faculty and peers provide communities of practice to surround and support them. To understand how the program works, it is important to understand

the foundational paradigm of transformative leadership, the identities students enact as they explore their leadership transformations, and the ways in which we teach skills to enact those identities: the pedagogies of project-based learning and communities of practice used in the program.

Transformative Leadership

The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program is rooted in the paradigm of transformative leadership. “Transformative leadership begins with questions of justice and democracy, critiques inequitable practices, and addresses both individual and public good” (Shields, 2010, p. 558). According to Astin and Astin (2000), transformative leadership is explained by recognizing

...the value ends of leadership should be to enhance equity, social justice, and the quality of life; to expand access and opportunity; to encourage respect for difference and diversity; to strengthen democracy, civic life, and civic responsibility; and to promote cultural enrichment, creative expression, intellectual honesty, the advancement of knowledge, and personal freedom coupled with responsibility, (p. 11).

In order to make and uphold commitments as mentioned in Caldwell et al. (2012), transformative leaders must re-frame their world views and their senses of self in order to re-think assumptions and develop new solutions and systems (Christensen & Raynor, 2003; Pava, 2003; Quinn 1996).

Furman's (2012) conceptual framework, created to engage learners in developing the necessary capacities to become leaders of change in their communities, has three prongs: 1) praxis, 2) dimensions, and 3) capacities. Furman explained praxis must involve both reflection and action that spans across the dimensions including the personal, interpersonal, communal, systemic, and ecological. While engaging in reflection and action across these dimensions, we see the continuum of learner to activist emerge. This continuum allows students to see a path for engagement and goals to work toward. This continuum also offers a way for students to put their skills to use in ways that are meaningful for them and impactful for their communities.

Ally, Advocate, and Activist Identities

When we conceptualized this program, we envisioned those who begin this journey start as learners. Learners have an awareness of self and of others, a willingness to uncover internal "records" related to oppression and to engage in critical reflection, possess an understanding of control and cultural domination, and possess a budding ability to expose their own thinking (Brown, 2006; Dunn, 1987; Senge, 1990). While being a learner is an active position, it does not need to be a visible, or public, one. Learners can do so in relative privacy, without alluding to others that they are gaining knowledge. A student is enacting a learner identity when reading, listening to speakers, friends, or media, or viewing media about social justice issues, individual stories or marginalization, or leadership theories to be applied.

When learners are ready to put their skills to use, such practice inherently makes the individual more visible and moves the learner to an ally identity. An ally is an individual from a majority group who personally supports those who are in an oppressed population with the goal of ending the oppression (Washington &

Evans, 1991). These identities are rooted in the public enactment of one's knowledge and to position oneself as an agent for change (Trueba, 1999). While allies are visible and public, ally work can be performed within a tighter circle. Students enacting ally identities participate in marches and rallies with or for their marginalized friends; join organizations; engage in public displays of support such as t-shirts and bumper stickers; go with friends to meetings, events, or services; support friends who are talking with others about the personal impact of issues; and listen to friends talk about an issue (McKee & Bruce, 2018). Allyship serves as a bridge between private and public engagement in social justice-oriented identities as one begins to "show up" for impacted people.

When learners and allies move into more visible roles, they become advocates. An advocate communicates the urgency of a call to action rooted in shared values (Ganz, 2009), which necessitates a much more public and visible role. One advocates while working on committees (often with non-allies) to change policy or when making phone calls and knocking on doors to get others to mobilize. Advocates engage in fundraising, speaking, and writing about causes, as well as speaking on behalf of impacted people in spaces that are not accessible to them. People engage in advocate identities when they voice what they have learned to encourage others to engage in learner, ally, advocate, or activist identities.

The most visible of these identities is the activist. Activists organize others to mobilize and deploy resources to support that call to action to remove forms of injustice (Ganz, 2009; Trueba, 1999). An activist plans phone banks, neighborhood canvasses, events, letter-writing campaigns, and social media efforts to lobby for legislation and to influence policymakers and the public alike. Activists develop response teams for social justice issues and maintain networks to engage others in developing change. People enact activist identities when they organize – or *activate* – others to engage in learner, ally, advocate, or activist identities.

The development of ally, advocate, and activist identities requires the willingness to engage in "critical and constructive inquiry" (Sironnik & Kimball, 1996, p. 187). The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program is rooted in a pedagogy of project-based learning with specific activities designed to stimulate the necessary inquiry for identity development: provocative class discussions, reflection on critical incidents, controversial readings, dialogic teaching, discourse communities, a pedagogy of hope, and action plans (Brown, 2004; Brown, 2006; Trueba, 1999).

It is essential for students to understand that addressing issues of justice and equity requires engagement in all of these identities to varying degrees and in consideration of the context of the issue and one's

personal position. Within an issue or context, a student must know the appropriate identity to enact. This is rooted in one's knowledge, skills, and desired outcomes, as well as one's position relative to the existing communities working to address the issue. It may be far more important and appropriate to serve as an ally to an impacted person than it is to be the one speaking. By facilitating student involvement in existing communities, the program is fostering the ability to know one's role and support the work of others.

Project-based Learning

Project-based learning employs a driving question to position students to solve a real-world problem with guidance from faculty and experts but through their own initiative (Adderley et al., 1975). The curriculum for The Oaks employs Morgan's (1983) project component approach in which the project is interdisciplinary and addresses real world issues that require independent work and problem-solving abilities while the course addresses parallel content. The intent is to develop a three-way partnership among students, faculty, and people impacted by the issue (Guile & Griffiths, 2001). Project-based learning facilitates the development of critical thinking and understanding of subject matter (Heitman, 1996). Further, by positioning students to address real-world problems, project-based learning can facilitate the development of identities in line with those issues. However, as Dewey (1938) cautioned, it is essential that educators emphasize the process of learning over the product, so the role of the program mentor becomes more important as a mechanism for cementing the learning component of the program and for ensuring that students are applying leadership theories and best practices to their work.

Communities of Practice

In order to emphasize process and facilitate the engagement with experts necessary to understand these complex, real-world justice, equity, and liberation issues, as well as to enact the learner, ally, advocate and activist identities, Oaks scholars build a community of practice. Communities of practice engage newcomers with near peers – those who are slightly further along in their journeys – and experts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Participation in a community of practice allows individuals to develop skills and ways of being necessary to feel a sense of belonging and an identity in line with the practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger 1998). To facilitate the development of a community of practice, The Oaks program is structured so students enter with a group of newcomers and have regular, intensive formal and informal interactions with each other, peer mentors, faculty members, and experts. The peer mentors are

students who completed the program in the previous year and choose to return to continue their development and support others in their learning. The faculty are leadership educators and teacher educators who have engaged in justice and equity work. The experts are members of the larger community who engage in justice and equity work professionally. The community of practice supports the project-based learning by providing access to authentic problems, roles, and practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

Description of Application

The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program, housed in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences at North Carolina State University, is directed by faculty in the Department of Agricultural and Human Sciences. This one-year, co-curricular program engages students in the study and development of transformative leadership skills while encouraging the enacting of learner, ally, advocate, and activist identities for those who are interested in social justice causes. Currently in its third year, the program is jointly funded through grants, departmental support, and corporate and private funds. Program objectives guide the learning of transformative leadership skills and the development of active and public identities related to social justice work:

1. Increase participants' knowledge of social justice issues in a global sense and in the specific context of agriculture or natural resources.
2. Provide participants opportunities to develop understanding of transformative leadership and its requisite skills so they may define a leadership role for themselves in the processes of social justice and inclusion.
3. Increase their awareness of personal biases, injustices, and exclusions.
4. Develop the "systems thinking" skills to see how injustice is furthered by systems of institutions and policies.

To facilitate learning and growth, program scholars engage in action and reflection as described by Furman (2012). Using Furman's framework, scholars are immersed in project-based learning where they engage in leadership community, confront issues of justice and equity, read extensively and reflect, travel to explore justice and equity in issues in other settings, and finally, put the skills developed into action with their final projects.

We introduce the social justice issues globally, and the students conceptualize them within the context of agriculture or natural resources. Student will choose one issue about which they are passionate to direct their program efforts. Once they have their issue, they create a project that allows them to enact a public identity to

tackle that issue. Students target either advocate or activist identities which encourage growth, and they work with their program mentor and issue experts to develop and enact their plan to address the issue. The development of an artifact as a result of their plan—a policy memo, a phone banking script, tweet-storm strategies and hashtags, an organizing strategy and resulting team, an educational program, etc.—is an essential benchmark and prompt for discussion among participants and between participants and mentors (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995; Star, 1989). For example, after introducing the issue of heterosexism, a student chose to explore and compare benefits available to same sex couples in agriculture and non-agriculture industries with the intention of driving industry policy changes and suggestions for national level legislation. Another developed and delivered an educational program for small farm operators on reducing gender-based violence and health issues among female-identifying field workers.

Mentors are an essential part of engaging in communities of practice for the scholars. Scholars have access to near peers, (program peer mentors), experts (program faculty mentors (FMs), and community partners (CPs) who guide and advise the scholars through their year. Program peer mentors (PMs) are outstanding former scholars who choose to come back to the program for a second (or third) year. PMs are provided a deeper and more intense course of study to encourage further learning and more active and public identities, while also being engaged with the current scholars. PMs host reading circles and documentary film nights and provide one-on-one and group goal check-in sessions and reflection times. FMs and CPs provide content for learning sessions; connect students with socio-cultural events around campus and in the surrounding communities; host one-on-one monthly meetings with scholar mentees to monitor progress toward goal completion; provide strategic direction and assistance for final projects, debrief readings and learning sessions; and foster relationships among and between faculty, scholars, peer mentors, and social justice professionals.

The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program Learning Sessions

We believe, inherently, that leadership is meant to move communities forward toward a more just and equitable place. Without leadership, justice and equity do not exist. Leadership is one mechanism used to enact positive change. But to lead, we must first recognize the world in which we live for all of its advantages and its challenges. Oaks Leadership Scholars Program Scholars study the institutions and systems in which we live and work. Scholars acknowledge that these systems

do not occur in a vacuum and therefore spend time learning about the intersection of these systems and the ways in which they act on (and for) people. At its heart, the Oaks Leadership Scholars Program is a leadership and social justice program, so time and effort are heavily weighted toward participants' building of transformative leadership skills to address these issues of justice and equity. Scholars actively participate in two formal cohort meetings each month devoted to learning these skills.

Reading is one of the most powerful tools available to gain knowledge, and scholars read extensively throughout their program year. Participants are provided with contemporary scholarship readings related to positionality, leadership, and equity work, and they discuss readings in larger cohort learning sessions and in smaller reading circles. Formal cohort sessions and reading circles engage students in learner identities and foster relationship building for a robust community of practice.

Table 1 outlines program content including the barriers to social justice addressed, the readings provided, and the transformative leadership skills developed.

In addition to the training participants receive, scholars are required to seek out one external socio-cultural experience each month on their own to experience learning opportunities outside of the Oaks Leadership Scholars Program Circle. These experiences could be attending a workshop, cultural event, speaker, art exhibit, etc., on campus or in the local community. A snapshot of some events students have participated in include campus workshops on the following:

- *What is Racial Justice? Recognizing Our Role in Classism*
- *Creating Accomplices: Supporting Queer and Transgender Students of Color*
- *Pulse of the Pack: A Native American Drumming Workshop*
- *Addressing Harassing Behavior*, and
- *Recognizing and Responding to Micro-aggressions*.

Campus ally programs include *The GLBT Center Advocate Program*, and community workshops include those in the *Islamic Center of Raleigh Open House*. Also, triangle learner/ally opportunities include *Red for ED Rally @ the Capital*, *March for our Lives Rally*, and the *HKonJ March/Rally*. These experiences allow students to affirm ally identities – showing up for others – while continuing to engage in learner behaviors.

Program Travel

Oaks Leadership Scholars Excursions are some of the most impactful parts of the Oaks experience.

Table 1
Program Content

Month	Barrier to Justice/Equity	Transformative Leadership Skill(s)	Program Readings
August	Intersectionality	Questions of justice & equity	Intersectionality
September	Heterosexism	Systems thinking	Right Side of History
October	Sexism	Deconstruction & Reconstruction of systems; visioning equitable futures	We Should All be Feminists Feminism is for Everybody
November	Racism	Practicing critical social theory	New Jim Crow Between the World & Me
December	Maintaining enthusiasm and energy	Knowing your position and role	Hope in the Dark
January	Faithism	Advocacy in action	
February	Classism	Activism & activating others	The Working Poor
March	Ableism and Ageism	Forming alliances while representing your group	No Pity
April	Ethnocentrism	Meeting with officials	Inconvenient Indian The People's History

Scholars travel two times during their program year in order to connect in real-world leadership, justice, and equity settings. The first excursion is a North Carolina-centered experience where scholars spend the day at the International Civil Rights Museum in Greensboro and work with individuals and non-profits from the surrounding community. At the end of the program year, Scholars travel to Washington, D.C. This year scholars visited the African American History Museum, attended the Leadership Conference on Civil & Human Rights, and met with icon of justice and equity work Congressman John Lewis of Georgia, and met with Senator Cory Booker's legislative aides who work on agricultural issues. Excursions promote engagement in learner identities (Congressman Lewis and museums), ally identities (supporting organizations), and advocate identities (discussing issues and their resolution with policymakers). Further, the excursions provided access to people who are engaged in activist identities (e.g., The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights and Congressman Lewis) and allowed scholars to discuss their own work with these experts.

Action

Scholars are tasked with setting two goals for their Oaks Leadership Scholars Program Year to advance their knowledge, skills, and position and keep a learning journal to gauge their own development. At the

end of their year, scholars complete a final project demonstrating the impact they are making in our world, and the project is presented to campus and community partners at the end of the spring academic term prior to the May Excursion. Each student identifies a justice/equity issue about which they are passionate and where they believe they can make an impact. Every project does the following:

- Identifies and works toward an identified outcome(s) (e.g., Legislation or policy change).
- Demonstrates a connection to the transformative leadership skills and the associated academic theory related to the issue.
- Requires significant outside research. Students provide a minimum of 10 outside sources related to the issue including both popular press and academic sources.
- Documents the time students have connected with groups outside the Scholars program doing similar work. Students are required to connect with campus and community partners to leverage resources in meeting project objectives. Examples of campus organizations include the GLBT Center, the Women's Center, the Multi-Cultural Student Center, Student Ombuds, and Student Health. External partner organizations include the GLBT

Center of Raleigh, NC Commission on Racial & Ethnic Disparities, Campbell University School of Law and NC ACLU.

- Ends with a task or tasks for the audience (ex. phone calls, awareness postcards, social media campaigns, legislative meetings, fund raising). Students engage with the projects of other Scholars, but Scholars also engage their peers and communities.

The project is intended to promote engagement in each of the identities on the continuum as scholars must define and refine a problem and desired outcome (learner), connect to people impacted and organizations doing related work (ally), speak or write about the issue and ask for change (advocate), and organize others to create change and support it (activist).

The Scholars have a very busy year. Formal cohort meetings happen twice monthly for a total of 6 hours. Required readings average 2-4 hours per week, and Scholars can attend an optional weekly reading circle that is another 1.5 hours. External events can be anywhere from 2 hours in length like a GLBT Center workshop to an all-day event like the HKonJ Rally. Many of the Scholars equate the time they spend with The Oaks to the kind of time they would spend in an intense upper level course.

Discussion of Outcomes/Results

The program has grown since 2016, its first year. The first year, program faculty invited nominations from faculty and staff throughout the College of Agriculture for undergraduate students who might be interested in or passionate about, social justice and equity issues. Program faculty utilized college email announcements, and list serves for college undergraduate program coordinators and directors of graduate programs, and they approached campus partners to solicit student nominations from the GLBT center, the Women's Center, and campus Scholars programs. All undergraduate majors in the college are eligible. Further demographic criteria for selection is student academic level (they must have at least 1 full year left on campus). Nominees were invited to complete a short application, five students were nominated and applied, all five were accepted, and one completed the program. In year two, 2017, the program received 11 student nominations, eight applied and were accepted for the program, and five completed. In year three, 2018, the program received 51 student nominations and 24 applied, yielding a substantial increase in the number of applications. The highly competitive nature of this third-year pool necessitated an interview component. For year three, our current year, nineteen students interviewed, and 11 were

accepted into the program. Additionally, a graduate student track was added, and two graduate scholars joined the program after the application and interview processes. The graduate students, like their undergraduate counterparts, must have been in degree programs in the college and have at least one full year left on campus. Finally, the College of Natural Resources asked to send students to the program, so our cohort will include 2 students from that college. Across the applications, across all years, it is evident that all students applying represent the overarching criteria that the program directors desire in applicants: the students who apply are all engaging in or desire to engage in learner and ally identities and express a concrete interest in, and commitment to, issues of justice and equity. While some are farther along in this journey than others, and some can identify immediately the issues about which they are passionate, others are still exploring, and all desire to be positive agents of change and can articulate that both in their applications and, in the most recent cohort, in their interviews.

In short, the program has seen tremendous growth in a very short time. But beyond our programmatic growth, program faculty completed several pieces of evaluation for the Oaks Leadership Scholars Program during the 2017-2018 program year.

Evaluation One: Enacting Learner, Ally, Advocate, and Activist Behaviors

The first evaluation was an assessment of the students' growth along the learner, ally, advocate, activist continuum. We posed the question: Does the program provide the students with opportunities to grow more visible and active in their social justice work? Program faculty created a short assessment identifying behaviors indicative of each identity of the continuum and then asked participants to log their behaviors (while faculty also logged) throughout the year.

Prior to the start of the program, all students had participated in learner identity behaviors including attending a workshop or watching a movie related to an issue of social justice. After the program all students had continued their participation in learner behaviors and extended those behaviors to include reading books.

Before the program only one-quarter of the students had engaged in ally behaviors including wearing clothes or displaying bumper stickers for a social justice cause, participating in marches or rallies, going with a friend to a social justice-related service, or attending cultural events for cultures not their own. After the program all of the students engage in ally behaviors as listed above with the exception of participating in rallies or marches.

At the start of the year all of the students had interrupted someone who was making an insensitive or

offensive joke, an advocate behavior. However, most of the students had not engaged in other advocate behaviors. After the program, all of the students reported engaging in advocate behaviors including meeting with an elected official about a social justice issue, participating in a fundraiser, creating media, and speaking to a group about a social justice issue.

At the start of the year none of the students had engaged in activist behaviors including organizing a march or rally; organizing a speaker or meeting related to an issue of justice or equity; organizing an email or letter writing campaign, a phone bank, or neighborhood canvas related to an equity or justice issue; organizing a fundraising campaign for an issue; or leading an organization. After participation in the program, all students had engaged in activist behaviors including organizing speakers, email/postcard campaigns, and phone banks.

Students enter The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program in the learner and ally stages of the continuum. As the students have all engaged in learner and ally behaviors, program faculty can assume that the students have some exposure and experience in social justice issues before entering the program. This provides a baseline on which faculty can build a more focused and specialized programmatic experience for students. The Oaks' curriculum focuses on helping students learn about a wider range of issues, as well as on engaging in advocate and activist behaviors through the lens of transformative leadership, more specifically.

Evaluation Two: Final Projects

All of the students in the 2017-18 cohort completed projects that enact either advocate or activist identities:

1. A review of policies for non-discrimination in youth-serving agricultural organizations and recommendations for policy change and training,
2. A review of the inclusion of LGBTQ employees in family leave policies at agricultural corporations and recommendations for policy change and training, as well as a call to action for companies not yet on the HRC Equality Index,
3. A postcard party and social media campaign related to a state legislature bill on class size mandates and how they will impact rural communities,
4. A postcard party, social media campaign, and public comment campaign on proposed changes to the USDA's regulations on poultry line speeds and their impact on workers, and
5. The development of an educational program on the health and safety needs of female-identifying farm workers for small farm operators.

Evaluation Three: Student Reflection Data

Students were asked to reflect holistically on their experiences in the cohort. The following excerpts are a small sample of the reflection data collected:

- “The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program is special because it is allowing students the opportunity to establish space to develop and grow simultaneously in both leadership and social justice academic work while also offering professional development opportunities. This multidimensional approach enables students to be able to continue their personal and social growth while also growing into competent and well-rounded prospective employees. We develop skills that make us change activists in politics, industry, education, and our personal lives.”
- “The biggest thing I get from participating is the opportunity to grow my understanding of social justice and to grow myself. I not only get the chance to understand social justice and different identities through an academic perspective, I also get to take that perspective and apply it within the real world and within myself. Understanding myself as a gay man has taken on an entirely new dimension and perspective from learning about queer theory and heteronormative systemic barriers, and it gives me the chance to understand both the oppression I face, but also the privilege I benefit [*sic*], and how I can leverage that to support myself and other marginalized communities.”
- “One of the many comments that comes up in our program is, ‘There can never be too many people doing this work.’ As leaders, we often talk about wanting to make a change through the world, but we rarely know how to do that. The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program gives us both the knowledge and skill set to go out and make a change. If you want to be an activist, a scholar, a leader, or just someone who wants to know themselves better, then the Oaks Leadership Scholars Program Scholars is the place to develop those passions, skills, and journeys to help ourselves grow and change the world.”

Practitioner/Participant Reflections

The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program is unique in many ways. Its home in a college of agriculture in and of itself makes it one of a kind, for the present. However, the program directors hope quite sincerely that one day, programs like The Oaks will be obsolete. But for now, The Oaks has created a practical space for

the kinds of leadership conversations that are not found in traditional colleges of agriculture. After two successful program years, some things have crystalized that bear sharing here for those interested in creating similar programs.

Plan to Meet Students Where They Are

Even students who self-identify as learners and/or allies have quite a bit to learn as they move along the continuum toward advocate and activist. This will require time and effort on the part of the practitioner to get to know the students who are coming to the program. Plan plenty of both formal and informal times for discussions—large and small group and one-on-one time—in order to get to know from where the participants are coming. In the case of The Oaks, formal time includes selection interviews, program orientation, cohort meetings, reading circles, and mentor meetings. Informal times include attendance at workshops/events on campus together with students, student driven meetings, and coffee talks.

Be Nimble Enough to Frame (and/or Re-frame) Curriculum and Pedagogy in Order to Meet the Needs of Participants

One size does not fit all in this work, so program facilitators must be able to forecast the needs of participants and adjust accordingly. In one cohort you may have a wide variety of experiences and passions, which would look quite different from the delivery of the content to a group who were more homogenous in their experiences and interests. For example, our first full cohort of students were all very much learners, so the curriculum was very basic in both areas: leadership and justice/equity. Our second cohort of students are all coming to the program with substantially more knowledge and experience in both realms. Faculty reframed the curriculum so that students would be more challenged in both content areas. Readings are denser, and reading circles are more focused on the synthesis and application of the material for problem solving versus the ensuring of comprehension. Final projects include a greater amount of research and a larger activist component. Excursions will have a self-directed component, allowing students to have part of each travel experience as time to pursue avenues of their own choosing and to relate to their identified problem. The second piece of this is the need to help contextualize these issues for the students coming to us from outside the college. While we teach the barriers to social justice, globally, we work with the students to conceptualize them locally to agriculture. When students from outside the college join us, it requires work on our part to help the students operationalize the barriers to their own

contexts. Spending time working with Natural Resources faculty, reading scholarly and popular press literature from natural resources disciplines, and connecting to organizations that work in the areas of environmental justice have all been a part of our process as we work with our Scholars from CNR. The process would be somewhat similar when inviting Scholars from other educational contexts across campus.

Adopt the Dichotomous Position of Learner and Advocate

Program faculty find that they spend a tremendous time learning themselves. As a learner, schedule time for your own continuing education in order to provide the relevant content for program participants. As an advocate, have more than one elevator speech. While all faculty are able to articulate what programs are all about, it is important for programs like these to also plan ahead and have ready a short exposition about WHY the program exists. In the case of the Oaks, because the content of the program is (seemingly) so divergent from the mission of the College, faculty spend significant time explaining the history of community development and leadership education through the mechanism of the Cooperative Extension Service (also housed in the College of Agriculture). When we're helping communities thrive through leadership development programming, inherently we are also working (hopefully) for more just and equitable systems. The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program faculty commit to extend their own learning, and so spend approximately 10-15 hours each semester in workshops and seminars offered by campus and community partners to do so.

Plan Experiential Learning That Stretches All Participants

Leadership learning is often very abstract for students, especially those who have little real-world experiences. In the case of this content, it is imperative that students have the opportunity to experience the enacting of these identities while using the leadership tools learned.

Program Improvements

In addition to our reflections, we continue to (think about and) refine the program to better meet program objectives. As we look ahead to our next cohort, several items are on our list to improve the program.

Additional formal cohort time to address readings. While the program has optional reading circles, because of busy schedules, not all students can attend consistently. Program faculty have decided to

add an additional cohort meeting each month (bringing total monthly cohort meetings to three) to have focused reflection and debriefing time on the readings.

Reflection prompts. In order to more appropriately gauge the student development in the written reflections, instead of providing writing prompts that change each week, faculty decided to instead offer a single consistent prompt that allows students more freedom to write and reflect on their unique journeys.

Movie Nights. Movie nights have, so far, been hit or miss. This was an addition asked for by the Scholars, and so it becomes incumbent on the Program Directors to figure out how and when to schedule these activities to make the most of the opportunity for our scholars.

Resource List. Throughout the year(s) we have compiled a significant resource list (readings, documentary films, etc). We need to cultivate a resource list in a permanent location that is easily accessible to our scholars and can be easily refined as we continue to add resources while removing those that become outdated.

Implications of the Practice

The potential benefit of a program like the Oaks Leadership Scholars Program is the increased ability for students, committed to creating positive change in their communities, to develop advocate and activist identities for transformative leadership. Further, students refine the ways that these identities and transformative leadership are conceptualized so that there is intentional facilitation of student leadership development.

The Oaks Leadership Scholars Program operates with the intention of preparing students to apply a transformative leadership lens to their lives and careers long after they have left the institution. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to see the work as facilitating the scholars' identity development toward becoming advocates and activists so that it becomes a part of the core of how they see and represent themselves in all of their work. It is our intention that these students will be agents for change in the agricultural organizations and industries they will lead so that these organizations and industries orient themselves toward increasingly just and equitable work and practices.

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