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HIGHER EDUCATION AS THE DOOR TO A WIDER WORLD:

Oakland High School Leadership Seminar 2013

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this service-learning project was to identify high school students who may not think they have the opportunity for a higher education. The theme was higher education as the door to a wider world. Messages shared gave these young adults skills to increase their self-confidence and become better leaders at school and at home. Speakers were carefully selected as those who have experienced life's hardships while following their dreams. Speakers gave hope to the Lafayette, Indiana Oakland High School Government class that anything is possible.

Oakland students are starving for the tools that will make their life's journey smoother, and it is our intent to help them through service-learning projects. In spring 2014, service-learning events were expanded to include Jefferson High School (also in Lafayette, Indiana) with the goal of adding two additional high schools in the near future. Through service-learning, we are looking for brilliant leaders in unexpected places, and, in return, we are getting unexpected returns. How does someone stay inspired to teach young adults? Look into the eyes of these students after one of our seminars and you will find the answer.

INTRODUCTION

"History has shown that brilliant leaders come from unexpected places. It is this event's intent to look in unexpected places for brilliant leaders." (Daniel Winger)

The Oakland High School Leadership Seminar was a 2-hour seminar in which student government students were given the opportunity to participate in a pilot program with the goal of building self-esteem and encouraging the pursuit of postsecondary education. The seminar was conducted as part of a project for Organizational Leadership and Supervision (OLS) 399 Ambassadors, the College of Technology Ambassador Program, taught by Professor Michele Summers. The project required students to actively participate in four sessions on topics that influenced their daily personal life experiences and evaluated the effectiveness of the seminar.

The seminar was designed based on the family structure in today's environment. The nuclear family structure of the 1950s is gone. Diversity in the modern family dynamic where single parents, stepparents, grandparents, or siblings can be the primary caregivers has created a need for minors to develop a stronger sense of self. Aside from dealing with various family dynamics, there are added obstacles these students may face, such as being young parents while trying to finish high school, not to mention the insecurity of determining their individual identities. While dealing with these obstacles, a higher education might seem unattainable for many reasons, the biggest being cost. The overall theme of the seminar was to communicate the message that pursuing higher education can provide countless opportunities to excel.

I viewed the OLS 399 project as an opportunity to seek young adults who have obstacles in their lives which may affect how they see themselves, as well as how these obstacles may prevent them from pursuing a higher

education. A major goal was to show them that a higher education is attainable to anyone with the self-confidence, drive, and desire to succeed. Professor Summers, an associate professor in Organizational Leadership, approached me with the idea of working with Oakland High School in Lafayette, Indiana as a part of the Ambassador course. In the past, students enrolled in OLS 467: Service Learning, taught by Professor Summers, and completed an art project to enhance the innovation and creativity of Oakland High School students. Recognizing that Oakland High School's mission is "to provide comprehensive, rigorous secondary educational opportunities and relevant community experiences that will prepare students for work, active citizenship, and postsecondary endeavors," I realized that this mission aligned well with the purpose of the leadership seminar that I was proposing. The next step was to approach this school about participating in the program.

When planning the seminar, I took the approach of locating speakers with information that would help students deal with challenging family issues as well as how to deal with a diverse student body. Specifically, this program was designed so that there would be four speakers who would have conversations with the students about subjects that would affect their personal lives, as well as helping them know that someone out there cares what happens in their lives. After discussions with Oakland High School, we decided that the student government would be the students who would directly benefit from this program while serving as participants in a pilot leadership seminar. A total of 11 students actively participated in this event. The seminar was funded in part by the Community Service/Service Learning Grant through the Purdue University Office of Engagement Student Grant Program. Experience with the grant writing process was a learning outcome of this event that I did not think of when formulating how to put this event together. To supplement the funding provided by the grant, the College of Technology Lafayette sponsored the food and beverages that were provided to student participants at the midway break in the program.

All student participants received a packet with speakers' biographies, the agenda for the seminar, a College of Technology Lafayette ink pen, and an exit survey. The students also received a 2013 Leadership Seminar polo shirt that they could wear to school. The shirts gave the students a great deal of pride that they were chosen as leaders to represent the student body at this function. The four speakers were each given a 20-minute session to speak on their topics and take questions from the 11 students. The total time for this event was 2 hours with a

20-minute break to eat, a 10-minute welcome message, and 10 minutes to complete an exit survey.

The first session focused on the use of social media and the Internet, which consumes a lot of a young adults' time. My first idea of how to reach these young people was to have cyber police speak on the topics of cyber bullying and phishing, which proved to be successful in grabbing the attention of the student participants. The point of putting too much information about yourself on the Internet was emphasized to the students by the statement, "If you wouldn't speak to this person passing them on the street, don't speak with them on the Internet" (Purdue University Cyber Police).

The second session built from the theme of the first session but in a broader context. Young adults who do not feel they are getting enough attention at home will try and find the attention they need in other places and from other people, which makes these young adults vulnerable to social predators and abusive partners. Having a professional speak on the subject of abusive relationships helped these young adults look for the signs that this could be happening to them or their friends. One statement that seemed important to the students was, "One sign of a potentially abusive relationship is if your partner demands to see your private e-mails and text messages or snoops through personal communications without permission."

For the third session, I wanted to convey to these young adults that they have the option and the ability to get a higher education, as well as achieve greater things than they can imagine at this point in their lives. Also, I realized that the first two sessions were presented by people who were over 50 years old. I needed to find speakers closer to these students' age so that they could relate and connect to the speaker. I achieved this with a young lady from Purdue that spoke about a young person's life journey and the importance of starting it now. She said, "Acknowledge the importance of setting goals and then the hard work needed to achieve those goals. You have to be very dedicated to continue your education after high school."

The fourth and final speaker was a freshman in college that was also a county fair queen. She presented "Facing Adversity." As a young high school student, her school bus was hit by another vehicle, and she almost lost her life. Fighting back to good health, she became an honor student while at the same time winning a fair pageant. She said, "With a strong will to be successful and with the support of others, I am now an honors student in college."

Measuring what the students got out of the event was done with an exit survey that contained the following questions:

- What subject was the most relevant to your life now?
- What subjects would be helpful to you in planning your future career path?
- What do you see as obstacles that you might encounter in the future?
- Would you like to see an Oakland student present a session?

I received some very helpful feedback from the students regarding the seminar. Many students commented on the “abusive relationship” session. One notable comment was, “This session made me realize that I had the right to say ‘no.’”

Taking service-learning classes at College of Technology Lafayette has inspired me to create more projects to help young adults achieve higher self-esteem and to consider higher education. I also feel that service-learning classes helped me become a positive influence on young adults’ lives. As a nontraditional student, I have made most of the mistakes that prevented me from getting a college education. The use of my own life experiences has helped me in my OLS courses at College of Technology Lafayette. By helping guide these young adults with seminars like this, hopefully these students will not make some of the poor decisions that I did at their age.

A postevent meeting was held with the Oakland High School principal, student government teacher, the College of Technology Lafayette professor, and myself to discuss what worked and what did not at the 2013 event. Using the exit surveys and our personal observations of the students during each presentation, we decided the cyber security was not an issue about which the students were concerned. The two younger presenters were more relatable to the students because they were closer in age to the audience. The abusive relationship session was the most successful of the topics that reached the students in a meaningful way.

A poster was designed highlighting the results of this leadership seminar. The poster was displayed at Purdue University’s second annual Academic Community Engagement Poster Presentation on April 15, 2014. By creating a poster for this event, I was able to learn skills including photo design and information layout, how to present a series of events in a small amount of space, and how to get the attention of possible contributors for the

next event. I have had three people call me about becoming prospective speakers at the 2015 Oakland Seminar. They saw the poster displayed at the poster presentation and liked the idea of providing young adults with the type of information described on the poster.

Oakland asked if it would be possible to do another seminar for 60 students, eight teachers, and ten guests. More content was requested, and the event was expanded to an all-day event to provide in-depth information to students and increase interaction. They also asked if the College of Technology Lafayette could make this a once-a-semester event. Applying for the Community Service/Service Learning Grant through the Purdue University Office of Engagement Student Grant Program early was the first option for funding. The 2014 event was in conjunction with all of the students learning about diversity in American culture. To prepare the students for the March 5, 2014 seminar, College of Technology Lafayette bought Oakland the movies *The Bro Code* and *Miss Representation*. Both films deal with gender roles and how we, as society, look at ourselves.

This event started with students coming to a registry table where they received a nametag, a bag with an ink pen, a sharp pencil, a sharpie marker, a one-subject spiral notebook, a USB drive, and a College of Technology Lafayette folder containing the agenda, exit survey, as well as another nametag. Before the session started, the students were given instructions to write on the second nametag what it was that they wanted from other people. The example I gave was “trust,” which was written on my nametag. I told the students I needed them to trust that I prepared a day which would help them deal with obstacles they face every day at home and in school.

The sessions for the second event revolved around the challenge of interacting with different social cultures and the diversity challenges the students faced every day. Presenters had one full hour for discussion and to answer questions from groups of 30 students. At the midpoint of the day, we broke for lunch, which was provided by the College of Technology Lafayette. During lunch, an Oakland student was given a plaque to award her leadership abilities in speaking on the topic of teen pregnancy and how it affects her daily life while finishing high school. Oakland students who took part in the first leadership seminar were responsible for introducing the session speakers and fielding questions.

A “Family Dynamics” session asked the students to think about what defines a functional and a dysfunctional family dynamic. This was achieved by playing

an interactive game where the presenter would describe a family then ask the students if this description was of a functional or dysfunctional family dynamic. For example: the father has a full-time job running a couple of businesses, the mother goes to church regularly, the daughter is on honor role, and the son is well behaved. Most, if not all, the students answered that this described a functional family. The family described was the family on the TV show *The Sopranos*, which is a dysfunctional family. The students learned that what might sound like a “normal” family could be a family with problems.

A “Race and Ethnicity” session was presented by a young African American single mother with three children. She is a full time student in college while also working full time. For an experiment, she filled three applications for the same job using three versions of her name. The application she got called back on was an application which only used her first initials, not her name. This served as an example to the students of the effects of racism and stereotyping; she did not get called back when she used her seemingly foreign name.

A “Sexuality and Relationships” session was an invited repeat of the abusive relationship session that was put on in the first seminar. This extended session involved showing a short documentary of a girl in Indianapolis, Indiana, who was murdered by her boyfriend, who had shown all of the signs of being abusive and possessive. This real-life example of what to look for was extremely effective since the murder happened so close to Lafayette.

The movies *Miss Representation* and *The Bro Code* were used for the “Gender Identity” session. The classroom should be a “safe zone” with rules set in place, where things said would not be derogatory or demeaning. As an example of a session activity, each student was given a blue and pink sheet of paper; instructions were given to write on a sheet of paper “act like a man” and on the other sheet “act like a woman”. Students were asked to raise both papers in the air. Ninety-nine percent of the students wrote “act like a man” on the blue paper and “act like a woman” on the pink. A discussion followed why they did that.

Students at Purdue University’s Forestry Products Club made custom plaques, which were given to each speaker. The oak leaf pattern was to honor Oakland High School and was made with wood cut from a white oak tree in Tippecanoe County, Indiana. A planting of a red oak tree at Oakland High School was planned for spring 2014 to symbolize the growing partnership between the College of Technology Lafayette and Oakland High School.

The response to the “why” ranged from “This session was more entertaining” to “I am having issues with my own gender identity right now.” Suggestions were made by the Oakland students that they would like to see more seminars dealing with the emotional stress of family instead of family dynamics and school bullying.

I am finding that service-learning deals with a lot of intangibles; the things that you know are true but cannot be physically measured. For example, during the abusive relationship session, a young lady was sitting quietly and then, after an example of phrases abusive partners often use, her eyebrow raised and a tear ran down her cheek. After the session, I asked her if she was okay and her response was, “I thought that lady was talking about my boyfriend. He tells me all those things every day.”

Designing a poster for the Faculty Convocation Poster Session, March 29, 2014, and presenting it to faculty members to judge was another aspect of this project. This convocation was an opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students to showcase their research and engagement/learning experiences to College of Technology Lafayette faculty. The purpose of the poster session was to encourage student research.

More importantly, I have gained self-respect which will enable me to help others in a more meaningful way. College of Technology Lafayette and the service-learning projects are helping more than just the people and organizations we chose to deal with, but service-learning projects are helping the ones who organize, raise funds, and put on these events. I am becoming comfortable organizing an event for a group of diverse people.

Oakland students are asking the College of Technology Lafayette for the tools to prepare them for the upcoming life-altering decisions they may face. I will partner with the College of Technology Lafayette to help them through these service-learning projects. Now that the relationship between Oakland High School and the College of Technology Lafayette is established, the next step is to measure self-efficacy of these students before and after the events. The College of Technology Lafayette and I are going to continue to give seminars at Oakland High School and use them as a prototype to see what programs work and what needs to be improved.

By going to area high schools and reaching out to students who may be undecided about a higher education, it is my intent to help these students raise their self-esteem and help them realize that college is attainable. A goal that we would like to achieve is getting another high

school to allow us to present a leadership seminar in 2015. By writing a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for incoming service-learning program classes, future students will be able to spend more time on fundraising and recruiting of high quality speakers to present to their target school, and less on project management. At the time this paper was written, the College of Technology Lafayette, in partnership with Subaru of Indiana Automotive (SIA), held a Technical Seminar for Jefferson High School Project Lead the Way students. Service-

learning projects are a very successful way of teaching young adults that a higher education is not only a possibility, but a necessity.

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