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Servant Leadership as a Framework for Building University Community: The Intersecting Missions of Faith Partners and Public Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

As community engagement approaches continue to expand in urban-identified public colleges and universities, so have innovative community-university partnerships that now span a wide range of public and private sector organizations. Partnerships between public universities and faith-based institutions, however, have sometimes lagged because public universities have yet to appreciate ways in which their public missions align with those of local faith-based organizations. This paper examines the partnership established between a large, urban-identified, public research university and one of its campus ministries to implement a servant leadership model and asset-based community development methodology designed to enable the university community to work collaboratively, recognize their own and others' gifts and talents, and improve their own broadly-defined diverse communities. This research shows that through a servant leadership framework, faith can inform and enact this public mission to create active and engaged citizens. The asset-based partnership model shows promise for realizing the intersecting missions of faith partners and public higher education institutions, which can be replicated in with other institutions.

Keywords

Campus Ministry
Service Learning
Civic Learning
Community-University Partnerships
Coronavirus

Introduction

The community engagement missions of urban-identified public colleges and universities have expanded in recent decades to include all aspects of institutional operations, from traditional teaching, research and service to procurement, hiring and financial investments. This broadening of community-engagement approaches has opened a path to more inclusive and innovative community-university partnerships that now span a wide range of public and private sector organizations. Partnerships between public universities and faith-based institutions, however, have sometimes lagged behind in this expansion, in part because public universities have yet to appreciate ways in which their public missions align with the goals and objectives of local faith-based organizations. For example, many faith traditions place value on the use of an individual's gifts and talents towards creating a better world; and faith-based organizations that espouse those values align with universities that seek to graduate engaged citizens who can leverage their gifts and talents to participate in public problem solving within democratic societies. This paper overviews a multi-year partnership between Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU), a large, urban-identified, public research university and one of its campus ministries, the Pace Center, to implement a servant leadership model and asset-based community development methodology designed to enable students to work collaboratively, recognize their own and others' gifts and talents, and improve their own broadly-defined diverse communities.

VCU is located in the heart of Richmond, Virginia, the Commonwealth's capital city. VCU was established in 1968 with the merger of two historic higher education institutions, the Medical College of Virginia (MCV) and the Richmond Professional Institute (RPI). The resulting urban-oriented public research university uniquely focused on the state's unmet higher education needs while also helping to address the complexity of social and economic issues faced within the local urban population (Bonis, Koste & Lyons, 2006). Currently, the university serves as a major anchor institution in Richmond, enrolling more than 30,000 students and employing 2,550 full-time faculty members. As a majority-minority institution, VCU's student population is racially diverse. More than 30% of its student body are first in their families to attend post-secondary education and 32% qualified to receive Pell Grant funding (Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020). With no walls separating its campus from the city, VCU is very much an integrated part of Richmond, where many students, faculty and staff members live, work and spend their leisure hours in the neighborhoods surrounding campus.

Because of this long-standing integration between its campus and the surrounding communities, VCU has been a national leader in establishing infrastructure to support community-university partnerships. By 1978, VCU had formalized its engagement in the community with the establishment of the Division of Continuing Studies and Public Service, now called the Center for Community Engagement and Impact (CEI) and administered from the Provost's office. In both 2006 and 2015, VCU received designation from The Carnegie Foundation as a community-engaged institution, and VCU's current strategic plan includes collective urban and regional transformation as one of its four key themes. Through service-learning courses, VCU students participate with a variety of local faith-based institutions that sponsor initiatives serving the local community. For example, for the past 3 years VCU faculty and students from the School of Social Work and School of the Arts' Music Department have partnered with the Second Presbyterian Church's Mondays Walk-in Program to co-sponsor the RVA Street Singers

program, a community choir for those affected by homelessness in Richmond (Center for Community Engagement and Impact, 2019).

Located on VCU's campus, the Pace Center serves as the United Methodist Campus Ministry. It is supported by local United Methodist churches, their members, other individual donors, and local community organizations. The Pace Center was originally Pace Memorial United Methodist Church, which was historically known for working with other local churches to host a feeding ministry each week. The local church began offering a campus ministry in the 1970s, but closed its doors in 2000 when most of its members moved away and VCU expanded its footprint in the community. The Pace property stayed in the hands of the United Methodist Church and became "The Pace Center for Campus and Community Ministries" in 2001, continuing its focus on ministry for campus and the greater Richmond community. One central concern of campus ministry is creating and building social networks among students to combat the isolation frequently experienced by students in larger university settings (Mankowski & Thomas, 2000). Over the years, the Pace Center attempted to focus on building social networks within the community and the campus with varied and unsustainable results.

Although the Pace Center is uniquely positioned to capitalize on its proximity to campus (next to two high-rise student dormitories) to create programming that offers students opportunities to build relationships and to serve their communities, it operates in a campus environment where VCU's Interfaith Campus Ministers Association estimates that less than 2% of VCU students engage with an on-campus faith-based organization. Moreover, many in the community have experienced exclusion, trauma, and other unfavorable experiences with faith institutions or faith leaders. Nationally, partnerships between higher education institutions and faith-based organizations are long-standing, but not without challenges (Patel, 2018). University faculty and staff members are sometimes wary of collaborating with religious organizations for their curricular and co-curricular offerings, and are particularly sensitive to both real and perceived expectations for students to engage in activities that involve proselytizing.

Given this context, leaders at the Pace Center recognized that traditional campus ministry, consisting of worship and Bible Study, was not going to be the main way to reach the greater VCU community. Instead, in 2017 Pace returned to the central mission of the church: to be a foretaste of the Kingdom of God by providing a place where people of all backgrounds are in "right relationship" with each other, themselves, creation, and God. An important first step toward the Pace Center mission is to help students identify their own gifts, the gifts of others, and learn how to see these gifts as assets that can be used to build community wherever they find themselves. Given the diversity, density and location of VCU, the "VCU community" concept naturally encompasses more than on-campus students. Most students, and many staff and faculty live off-campus in adjacent city neighborhoods, thereby blurring town-gown distinctions typical of smaller, liberal arts colleges and universities. The Pace Center aims to build its programming to help students know their assets, recognize assets in people throughout the VCU community, and work collectively to build relationships and community to prepare students for their lives beyond campus.

Modeling Servant Leadership

Servant leadership is a philosophy based on the belief that a leader's primary role is to serve others, and to support the growth of individuals so they might flourish and achieve their full potential. The modern servant leadership movement emerged in response to Robert K. Greenleaf's essay, "The Servant as Leader," which he addressed to students, faculty, staff and administrators in institutions of higher education. Greenleaf proposed, "The best test, and difficult to administer, is this: Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?" (Greenleaf, 1977, p. 27).

The paradox of servant leadership is simply that leaders serve their followers; instead of focusing on their own personal needs and interests, the servant leader attuned to the needs and interests of others in their various communities (Ebener & O'Connell, 2010). Servant leadership can be understood through principles such as 1) valuing and developing people; 2) building community; 3) providing and sharing leadership; and 4) displaying authenticity (Greenleaf, 1970; Spears, 2010; Laub, 2018). These principles are achieved through characteristics such as listening deeply and communicating with others, empathizing with others and accepting them, committing to the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of others, and serving local communities (Keith, 2013).

Although made popular in secular education and professional development in the last several decades (Autry, 2001; Blanchard, 2018; Sinek, 2009), the concept of servant leadership can be traced back to the biblical accounts of the life of Jesus Christ. Jesus connected with what society deemed "the least, last, and lost" because he saw the value and worth of people. A vital component of his ministry was for those whom he served to grow as people and to be likely to become servants themselves. The United Methodist Church, which was born from the eighteenth-century movement of John Wesley, places a significant emphasis on God's grace as a gift for everyone that "forgives, heals, and empowers individuals and communities" (Carder & Warner, 2011, p. 11).

Servant leadership is also relevant to the mission and promise of higher education and is often realized through campus volunteerism and service-learning courses. The importance of civic engagement as a core university mission was reemphasized in the landmark report, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*, commissioned by the U.S Department of Education, which calls on educators and leaders to integrate civic inquiry into academic majors and address hands-on civic problem solving across differences (The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). Influenced by this report, the State Council of Higher Education of Virginia (SCHEV) (2017) recently adopted a policy requiring all public colleges and universities in Virginia to assess student learning in civic engagement, making Virginia the third state in the nation after Massachusetts and Maryland to implement a civic-engagement learning requirement at the higher education level. This nationwide emphasis on civic learning and engagement continues to grow as evidenced by the Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) (2019) *Revised Criteria for Accreditation*, which requires that colleges and universities within the HLC's region provide opportunities for student civic engagement in a diverse, multicultural society and globally-connected world.

One method frequently used by organizations and institutions to implement servant leadership principles is called Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD). This asset-based approach is built on the premise that everyone has gifts and skills that can be cultivated to strengthen communities, and that the key to developing thriving communities is to “locate all of the available assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness” (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 5). The ABCD method embraces the giving of these gifts, the power of association that occurs when gifts are joined, and the notion of hospitality that welcomes gifts of a diversity of “others” (McKnight & Russell, 2018). Indeed, identifying and mobilizing assets of individuals, organizations and institutions is central to the thriving of churches, higher education and the communities they serve.

Methodology

In 2017, the Pace Center reassessed its campus ministry mission utilizing an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) method to determine, “Where is God already at work on VCU’s campus and how is God calling the United Methodist Church to join that work?” The ABCD method proposes that communities can drive their own development by identifying and mobilizing their own existing, but often unrecognized, gifts and assets (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993). Using ABCD methodology, Pace leadership (including five students) conducted a Listening Campaign with approximately 40 VCU students, asking “If you could change anything about VCU, what would you do?” Interviewees also identified the interviewees’ own gifts, skills, and passions. Data from this Listening Campaign led the participants to organize several campus community events, including a Multicultural Thanksgiving and a series of community conversations where students shared their mental health stories.

During that same academic year, several VCU students approached Pace leaders with requests for assistance in completing volunteer and service-learning projects. These requests led Pace leaders to question the validity and community benefit of students’ volunteer and service-learning projects and sparked the idea that Pace could realize its core mission by creating and operating a program founded on ABCD principles that would help students learn to use those principles to build inclusive and assets-based communities with their fellow students.

In Spring 2019, Pace launched its Servant Leadership Institute (SLI) to realize this mission. SLI integrates ABCD principles and approaches into a 14-week curriculum. The SLI curriculum comprises five sequenced parts, 1) training and preparation; 2) discovery via a field-based Listening Campaign; 3) data analysis of Listening Campaign responses; 4) bringing to life via planning and execution of a community-building event; and 5) growth through reflection. The culminating goal of SLI is for students to plan and execute a VCU community event with the sole purpose of bringing to life the assets, skills, and passions of their fellow students.

Now in its fourth semester, SLI typically collaborates with faculty and students from two to four service-learning courses and/or living-learning communities per semester. Additionally, Pace advertises SLI on its website (<https://www.thepacecenter.com/servant-leadership-institute>) to any VCU student who wants to participate. For service-learning classes, Pace leaders partner with professors to teach the Servant Leadership curriculum. Ideally, class size does not exceed 35 students. For students from living-learning communities and those participating on their own

accord, Pace creates learning cohorts of between three and 35 students that meet during times that work with the students' schedules.

Pace staff members collaborate with participating professors before, during and after the semester to ensure that the SLI curriculum logically connects to the course's specific learning objectives. For example, Pace staff often assist professors in creating "organizing questions" that are added to the students' Listening Campaign interview questions and that connect with the course content. A World Religions and Global Ethics professor added the organizing question, "What do you most want to bring from your home to the VCU community" to its list of Listening Campaign questions. Through their Listening Campaign interviews with fellow VCU students, the SLI students could then gain a deeper understanding of global perspectives that exist on their incredibly diverse campus.

The following sections briefly overview the five sequenced parts of the Servant Leadership Institute (SLI) curriculum.

Training and preparation

Students begin the SLI semester with a one-hour online and one-hour in-person training of basic ABCD concepts provided in collaboration with Embrace Communities (<http://embracecommunities.org>), a local non-profit organization specializing in ABCD. This overview provides students with an orientation to the purpose and processes of the ABCD model and opportunities to practice Listening Campaign interviews through mock interviews with their classmates.

The listening campaign

Students begin the Listening Campaign after two hours of training. The Listening Campaign supports the foundational element of ABCD: "identifying and mobilizing individual and community assets, skills, and passions." Listening Campaigns use appreciative inquiry (AI) listening interviews to identify and mobilize three assets of the interviewees--their dreams/ideas, their gifts, and their networks. AI is a process for facilitating positive change in human systems (e.g., organizations, groups, and communities) that assumes when a human system is successful, the positive core of that system is active. AI begins by identifying this positive core and connecting to it in ways that heighten energy, sharpen vision, and inspire action for change (Center for Appreciative Inquiry, 2020). During the Listening Campaign, each SLI participant interviews several dozen fellow students, with individual interviews lasting between 10-45 minutes depending on the enthusiasm of the interviewee.

Although the interview data is important, the primary purpose of the interview is relationship building between the interviewer and interviewee so that interviewee assets are both identified and mobilized. Listening interviews are conversational, conducted face-to-face, and are especially vital when working with interviewees who feel disenfranchised or powerless. The relationship formed during the interview gives the interviewed student the confidence to share their skills, passions, and dreams with other students at the SLI's end-of-semester culminating community-building event.

The Listening Campaign’s “primary organizing” question seeks to identify and mobilize students’ dreams and ideas. This question centers on the following idea: “If you could change anything about VCU, what would you do?” The question is phrased in this way, rather than “What should the institution of VCU change?” so that it stimulates student thinking and communicates to interviewees that they have agency to positively influence their community.

Listening Campaign “gift” questions seek to identify and mobilize students’ skills and passions. Gift questions focus on the interviewees’ gifts of the head (knowledge and information), gifts of the hands (practical skills), and gifts of the heart (cares and passions). Most students have difficulty naming their own skills and gifts, and interviewers learn deep listening techniques to encourage the interviewee to ponder their lives in a way that helps reveal their innate and acquired talents. While the interviewer is focused on “valuing and developing” the interviewee, a relationship begins to form.

The Listening Campaign’s “involvement” question seeks to identify and mobilize the interviewees’ networks by asking if they know others who feel the same way and if those others would be willing to join to make something happen. This is an important element in helping participants learn the civic skills of “building community” and “providing and sharing leadership.” Although VCU’s student organizations are many, varied and a rich community asset, they often function in isolation from one another. When SLI participants are planning a community-building event, the answers to the involvement question help them identify existing communities that might agree to partner on that event.

Data analysis session

SLI student participants enter their interview data into a Google form by a specific due date, and a Pace staff member then performs content analysis to identify the top ten most frequent answers to each question. Students then participate in a 90-minute Data Analysis session with other SLI participants. First, the students collectively rank the top ten answers to the “primary organizing” question to reveal the top three answers associated with the highest levels of interviewee enthusiasm. Then, after the participants are given the top ten answers to questions about the gifts of the head, hand, and heart questions, they develop answers to the query, “How can you help make the dreams of these students come to life given all the gifts and assets within the VCU community?”

Ultimately, the result of the Listening Campaign and Data Analysis process is a list of community-building event ideas that students are passionate about coupled with a list of people who have the gifts to make the ideas a reality. At the end of the process, the students select one community-building idea to plan and execute *on their own* before the semester ends.

The community-building event

The ABCD model maintains that all efforts must be community-driven—“building communities from the inside out,” while Servant Leadership foundationally focuses on “providing and sharing leadership.” At their cores, these approaches rest on principles that support the value and agency of all people. For this reason, the SLI curriculum concludes with the planning and execution of a community-building event that is entirely student-driven.

The Pace Center sets broad parameters to ensure all community-building events align with its mission; however, the SLI students themselves dictate the characteristics of the event. Students are encouraged to reach out broadly to fellow students to help organize and execute the event and to reconnect with Listening Campaign interviewees who identified that they had relevant dreams or gifts. SLI students also draft an event budget and apply for funding from the Pace Center.

These events do not always run smoothly, but without fail, they are diverse, powerful, and usually well attended. Something unique occurs when an event is built from the inside out, rather than organized by a university department, student affairs office, or campus ministry staff. Students own the process and know what they want. The SLI Community-Building Event step is a real test of the ABCD process: Do the Pace staff members and faculty instructors trust the student community enough to let it dictate resources and decisions?

After each community-building event, the Pace Center notes the percentage of attendees who stay after the event to mingle and the percentage of attendees who come to a follow-up meeting to plan the next event. These represent some of the Pace Center's success metrics. The percentage of attendees who linger to talk with each other after an event indicates an early sign of community building. The percentage of students who attend the event's follow-up meeting provides evidence that students are identifying their own gifts and feeling confident that their gifts can be useful. From 18 students at Open-Mic Night to 100 students at the Community Café, Pace averages 80% of attendees who stay after the event and 30% who attend the follow-up meeting. Reflecting after one community event, VCU's Head of Counseling Services remarked, "There is a special community developing at Pace that doesn't exist anywhere else at VCU."

Growth through reflection

After the SLI participants conduct their interviews, participate in the data analysis session, and bring to life the assets of their community by staging a community-building event, they participate in three hours of reflection. This reflection occurs through individual and small group experiences and is a vital tool for instilling the principles of servant leadership, ABCD, and civic engagement. Students reflect on their own gifts, the gifts of their VCU community, their community-building event, community service projects they have done in the past, and how ABCD principles have affected their lives outside of the SLI experience.

When small groups gather for reflection, one of the first questions posed is "What surprised you about this experience?" Over half of SLI students report being surprised by how many fellow students were willing and happy to talk with them—often for extended amounts of time--during the Listening Campaign. To meet the SLI interview requirement, students often start by interviewing roommates and close friends, but eventually talk with students in their classes and random people at the library. In an age where students are often more comfortable interacting with others online than in person, SLI students discovered face-to-face connection with others is refreshing, even life giving. During the reflection time, students begin to see they are not alone in yearning for in-person engagement and for others to understand their gifts and dreams. This observation aligns with Brené Brown's research. Brown concludes, "Social media are great for developing community, but for true belonging, real connection and real empathy requires meeting real people in a real space in real time" (Brown, 2017, pp. 139-140). Research has shown face-to-face human interaction helps people live longer, more fulfilling lives (Pinker,

2014). The Listening Campaign helps students develop the skills to engage face-to-face with strangers through the Servant Leadership lens of valuing the other.

Findings

Since 2017, the Pace Center has led hundreds of students to interview thousands of their fellow students through Listening Campaigns. The organizing questions have varied, but the findings remain consistent. Overwhelmingly, students come to VCU for its diversity and urban setting. However, once they arrive, they don't engage with either to the degree they would like. When asked, "If you could do anything on campus, what would you do?" a strong majority said they would put on events where diverse people could connect. Students longed to engage with others from different academic disciplines, cultures, religions, political ideologies, socio-economic levels, and activity interests. There was a particular sense of isolation among the transfer and off-campus students. They longed for opportunities to engage with a diverse community that fit their exhaustive schedules, which usually included multiple jobs. These interviews also identified many valuable assets (skills, knowledge, passions) to contribute to the development of the VCU community, including gifts and passions around sports, the environment, social justice, wellness, cooking, arts, science, and mental health.

Community building during the COVID-19 epidemic

In Spring 2020, the COVID-19 epidemic brought dramatic change to campus life. These changes presented numerous challenges to the Pace Center staff, to the professors whose classes were participating in the Pace Center's SLI, and to the students. The Pace Center director quickly had to determine how best to reconstruct the Data Analysis process from small group, in-person discussion sessions to an online environment which ensured students could discuss the findings of their interviews and have the opportunity to consider and execute community-building events.

Spring 2020 Listening Campaign data revealed that earlier trends identified through past listening interviews had intensified. Mainly, the isolation described by transfer and off-campus students in past semesters' interviews was now rampant across the entire student body. By the time students were told they would not be returning to campus after spring break, the students participating in SLI had already conducted all their in-person interviews. The next step in the SLI process was the data analysis meeting, a time to review the survey data and brainstorm community-building projects that would help bring their fellow students' dreams, gifts, and passions to life. However, the world around these students had shifted dramatically since the data was collected.

To get a general sense of the current atmosphere, each of the data analysis meetings conducted via Zoom started with the students answering, "What does community look like for you right now?" The 25 or so students took turns describing their new or intensified feelings of loneliness, isolation, frustration, and fear. During the data analysis meeting that followed, the students were able to extrapolate their feelings to the 33,000 other students who were experiencing the same shock. It was from that setting they took the findings of their earlier surveys and brainstormed ways they could build a sense of community and value among their fellow students. Throughout the rest of the semester, students used various social media platforms and online tools to build connection and bring to life passions and gifts. They shared ways they were caring for the

environment; challenged each other to a virtual soccer juggling contest while singing in different languages; collected recipes from a variety of cultures; displayed art, music, and writings that reflected on their quarantine experience; posted their favorite yoga poses; and watched a movie together followed by discussion. They also researched other ways their fellow students were building community on their own and shared those experiences to celebrate and inspire others. The semester ended with a Zoom reflection session where the students took stock of their experience.

The reflection session is the lynchpin of the Service Learning Institute. The coronavirus limited the usual amount of time and in-person methods used in the reflection session, so the Pace Center improvised with online tools such as Marco Polo video sharing and Zoom breakout rooms. With such a variety of tools to reflect on their experience, students inevitably found a way to share on a deep level. Even though campus life in Spring 2020 was dramatically changed, the reflection sessions revealed findings consistent with years past. This is a testament to the strength of the Servant Leadership model. Even in a semester where students' lives were turned upside down, the reflection session affirmed the SLI provides three essential opportunities for students to engage with Servant Leadership characteristics. They learn to talk to others, they learn to help others name and claim their value, and they are given the opportunity to put Servant Leadership methods into action. Student Elizabeth Roderick, who is also a co-author, shared that "during this process I also overcame my shyness, gained courage to talk to strangers, and realized my own gifts of listening carefully. I am now on the Board of Directors of the Pace Center, and use my service learning training to help others in the VCU community discover and apply their assets" (E. Roderick, personal communication, April 15, 2020).

The SLI challenges students not just to get over the hurdle of having a face-to-face conversation, but to make a connection that builds community and leaves them with a sense of value. When asked "What surprised you about this experience," the predominant answer is how willing people were to engage and how fulfilling it can be to help someone name and claim their dreams, gifts, and passions. Student Changjwok Deng reflected that the experience not only helped him get to know individuals, but he got to know the community he had hoped for when deciding to go to VCU. "It was very difficult to walk up to a stranger. What was surprising is that the people I was interviewing were very willing and very welcoming, which says a lot about the University and the students. I was surprised by how people wanted to talk with me. It was informative for me to see and know this community" (C. Deng, personal communication, April 22, 2020).

The reflection session also revealed the value in giving the students the opportunity to put the theory of Servant Leadership into action by planning and executing community-building projects by the end of the semester. Reflecting led them to see how easy it was to fall into the trap of focusing on their own gifts instead of creating a platform for their fellow students' gifts and passions to come to life. By reflecting on their projects together, the students came to understand that projects focused on engaging the gifts of fellow students took more initial time, but were ultimately much more successful. They also discussed the dangers non-profits face by just trying to get something done in a community and not taking time to get to know the community and its assets. This heightened students' awareness of the importance of giving agency not just to their fellow students, but in all community-building initiatives.

Lasting impacts of the Servant Leadership Institute

The Servant Leadership Institute has created two lasting impacts: student participants develop into servant leaders who enact civic engagement, and those servant leaders create spaces for community building. Several SLI community-building projects have become staples on campus. For example, the Pace Center's Community Café developed out of Listening Campaign data that indicated (a) many VCU students dream about engaging in a diverse community and having an affordable place to eat on campus, and (b) students have the assets of cooking skills and passion for their culture. In 2019, a PhD student in Engineering leveraged these data to launch Pace's Community Cafe: \$1 Thursday Lunch. The Pace Center uses donations to provide the funds for the food and gives students access to its kitchen. Students do the rest. Each week a different student or student group cooks lunch using recipes from their cultural backgrounds. For one dollar, anyone with a VCU ID can come, eat, and enjoy the company of and conversations with other students, faculty and staff from diverse backgrounds.

The Community Café enables students to develop leadership skills they will carry with them after their time at VCU. Since 2019, 76 volunteer students have cultivated their gifts of organizing, budgeting, cooking, greeting, decorating, and leading a team of colleagues to participate in Community Café. Student chefs share their passion for cooking and their backgrounds by representing 30 different cultures. One group of student chefs went on to start their own catering start-up business, delivering West African Fusion food throughout the Richmond area. A unique community has developed amongst the students who come to eat at the Café—a community that could only have developed from a program founded using an assets based model. Over 500 different students have eaten at the Community Café, experiencing different cultures and conversing with students from all over campus. More than 100 students have made the Cafe an important part of their community, attending on a regular basis. Many of these students come from the isolated populations of transfer and off-campus students. The Café has served over 1,600 one-dollar meals on a campus where nearly 40% of students experience food insecurity (RamPantry, n.d.).

SLI student participants also apply their servant leadership skills beyond the campus to their off-campus community engagements activities. For example, SLI participant Ana Salas Paredes often volunteers as a translator at ICE prisons, and was able to use her skills to help incarcerated persons think about their own assets and gifts. She recently demonstrated her understanding of the servant leadership model when she noted, “For a while we would strictly bring in translation help, by helping them understand their court documents - but then when we started to do programs where we had them explore within each other what each one could do - they began to create a community and there was less fighting” (A. Salas Paredes, personal communication, April 23, 2020).

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the intersecting missions of faith organizations and public higher education institutions, and ways they can deepen their impact on community engagement by working together. The multi-year partnership between Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) and one of its campus ministries, the Pace Center, exemplifies how urban universities can enact their public mission through faith-based engagement initiatives. Through this collaboration, students gained characteristics consistent with servant leadership; they learned to communicate with others and listen deeply, empathize with and accept others, support the

personal, professional, and spiritual growth of others, and commit to serving their local communities (Keith, 2013).

The results of this partnership further the mission of the Pace Center as well as VCU, and the model could be valuable to other public institutions striving to cultivate engaged citizens who can solve public problems within democratic societies using their gifts and talents. The following discussion offers additional insights and implications of partnerships between faith organizations and higher education.

Overcoming obstacles through an asset-based approach

Although the mission of many faith organizations is overlapping with the mission and promise of higher education, there is still hesitation at public institutions to link too closely to faith organizations. The demographics of VCU predict skepticism about a Christian Campus Ministry; more than a quarter of VCU students identify as queer, while 91% of non-Christian young adults perceive the church to be “anti-homosexual” (Barna, 2007). In addition, VCU students come from extremely diverse backgrounds, representing faiths and cultures from all around the world, which may not always be accommodated in every faith organization.

Given this context, the partnership between VCU and the Pace Center was made easier by focusing its first collaboration around an asset-based model. The United Methodist Church ministry often centers around helping people realize their worth and identifying the unique gifts they have been given to *serve* their community. This ministry is inherently aligned with asset-based community development, which emphasizes identifying and mobilizing assets of individuals, organizations and institutions (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). The asset-based approach plays an important role in reducing student trepidation about working with a faith group, and in helping to relieve the tension between decisions to partner and concerns about keeping a separation between church and state.

A key example of the asset-based approach is the Pace Center’s Community Cafe, which is filled with students from all backgrounds. Students are invited to cook from their cultural backgrounds for others in the kitchen at Pace, and to pray or acknowledge the presence of the food in whatever way fits their culture before every meal. Regular interaction with students from diverse backgrounds around collaborative activities is critical for religious organizations hoping to build community (Bryant, 2007).

The asset-based approach also aligns with a democratic society’s goals inherent in public higher education institutions (National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, 2012). The servant leadership model, which uses an asset-based community development methodology, is designed to enable students to work collaboratively, recognize their own and others’ gifts and talents, and use those collective assets to build community. This intention is aligned with the purpose of public education, which extends beyond the personal gain of an individual student, and encourages students to recognize their social and public responsibilities in a democratic society.

Co-educating as servant institutions

It is possible that the COVID-19 epidemic, discussed in this article, may present what is referred to as a “window of opportunity” for faith and higher education institutions to recognize and embrace their intersections (Kingdon, 1995). Higher education and faith organizations share complementary missions to be servant institutions seeking to produce servant leaders (Wheeler, 2012; Laub, 2018). The time has come to rethink how higher education and faith organizations can intersect as co-educators, infusing servant leadership principles through the university curriculum (e.g., service-learning, civic learning courses) and informing how higher education “does” community engagement.

Universities could benefit from co-educating with partners who have counseling backgrounds. Many faith-based leaders go through Clinical Pastoral Education (CPE), which prepares them to provide spiritual and emotional counseling to people from a variety of faith backgrounds. This background proved to be important during the Spring 2020 SLI when the Pace director was able to tap into the question that had been gnawing at the professors for weeks, but to which they could not get an answer: *How were their students doing?* Through guided questions, most all the students shared their current status from very vulnerable spaces. This set an important foundation for the rest of the reflection in which they discussed implementing ABCD principles in a COVID-19 world.

Faith partners, which tend to have long-term relationships with nearby non-profits and adjacent communities, can co-educate on how students can “do” service-learning without causing harm. The Servant Leadership Institute would serve as a model prerequisite for student and faculty participation in university engagement initiatives, developing the adaptive skills needed to contribute to our democratic society. Through training that leverages the knowledge and skills of faith partners and higher education, we can prepare students to develop a “civic skill set” comprised of relationships vital to community engagement and a practice of joining with others to achieve common goals with a higher purpose (Caret, 2019).

It is critical that urban-serving, public higher education institutions embrace their social responsibility and public mission to prepare future generations to serve the greater good. This research shows that through a servant leadership framework, faith can inform and enact this public mission to create active and engaged citizens. While there are obstacles to overcome, an asset-based partnership model employed at VCU shows promise for realizing the intersecting missions of faith partners and public higher education institutions.

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