

Engaging Undergraduate Students to Be Agents of Social Change: Lessons From Student Affairs Professionals

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ABSTRACT

With an emphasis on how student affairs professionals and student development theory can assist public administration faculty, this article offers a framework for educating and developing undergraduate public administration students to be effective agents of social change. Developed with roots from student development theory, The Social Change Model of Leadership Development (SCM) is proposed as a framework that public administration faculty can implement to design and evaluate curricula that meet the demands of developing socially responsible students. Included in this article are examples of how the SCM can be used in the classroom.

Scholars in the field of student affairs, just as those in public administration, recognize that students want to be involved and engaged, but they are not always clear as to how to go about it. The authors, who straddle both fields, recognize the need to be more intentional in teaching activism to develop students as socially responsible citizens and as agents of social change that is not absent from content knowledge.

Public administration scholars King and Zanetti (2005) note that “the time is ripe for practicing a kind of public service that seeks to transform people and institutions that focuses on social and economic justice” (p. xx). This supports

the need to reevaluate how courses in public and nonprofit administration are taught. This article offers an interdisciplinary approach, drawing from both public administration and student affairs, to enhance course curriculum through the integration of intellectual content and identity development.

As educators, it is our responsibility to develop students with knowledge and skills that provide mechanisms to effectively integrate academic disciplines with an understanding of self in relation to others on campus, in the community, and across the globe. Intentional integration of student development theories, such as leadership identity development, in the classroom can effectively facilitate deeper understanding of how students are personally connected to greater social issues. Students develop as socially conscious leaders capable of creating sustainable social change. In other words, student development theory offers academic disciplines—specifically public administration, a framework in which to guide faculty and students through the process of developing oneself as an agent of change. The authors offer the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (SCM), a national leadership model designed specifically for use within higher education, as a tool to be implemented within public administration classrooms (see www.socialchangemodel.org for a visual representation the SCM).

To increase the effectiveness of government and nonprofit services, public administration faculty are challenged to engage their students to be socially responsible leaders capable of creating social change. King and Zanetti (2005) note that “[an administrator] can act as an interpreter and facilitator, but s/he can also act as a transformative agent by assisting others to articulate concerns, voice needs, and implement community-developed strategies for change” (p. xi). Through the use of the SCM, faculty can position students to understand their own voice and their role as facilitators as well as their potential impact within their community.

EXPLORING THE SOCIAL CHANGE MODEL OF LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Developed through the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI), composed of scholars in the field of student affairs, the SCM can be applied in many settings, including the classroom. According to HERI (as cited in Komives, Wagner, & Associates, 2009) the SCM has two central goals: “to enhance student learning and development and to facilitate positive social change at the institution or in the community” (p.19). The SCM promotes service and activism as vehicles for making meaning of life experiences, promoting social justice, equity, and self-knowledge (Renn, 2007).

Service and connection with others are values inherent to the SCM and include Consciousness of Self, Congruence, Commitment, Collaboration, Common Purpose, Controversy with Civility, Citizenship, and Change. These values are divided into three categories: individual, group, and societal. Change, the eighth value, is achieved from the interactions between individual, group, and societal values (Komives et al., 2009). There is no particular order in which

the model must be applied; the application of each category may not happen in the same order for all students in every setting.

Within the individual category, the values of consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment are included. This is the point at which students learn and become aware of their own values. Metaphorically, during this process, students understand the lens through which they see the world. Personality and self-awareness, as described within the SCM, are acknowledged and discovered in this category. There are many aspects of individual identity; it is multidimensional (Komives et al., 2009), and perhaps most important, it involves acquiring a greater understanding of self through the context of one's environment, race, sexual orientation, and gender (just to name a few). In other words, self-awareness, once acknowledged and discovered, means that students have a greater capacity with which to make meaning of and connection to their lived experiences.

The SCM incorporates the group category to emphasize that relationships must be fostered and nurtured (Komives et al., 2009). Care must be taken, especially when working with the community, to approach relationships and group activity consciously and respectfully. Specifically, this category includes the interplay between collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility. Ideally, students who are engaged in group activities will demonstrate all of these values, working together simultaneously. Awareness of these values will make for well-informed public administration students capable of interacting with diverse populations while effectively expressing agreement or dissent. Public administration students will gain the following core competencies allowing them to see issues from multiple perspectives: conflict resolution skills, challenging social constructions and preconceived notions, awareness of their ability to demonstrate activism, and an understanding of the importance of social equity.

At the societal-community level, students examine the value of citizenship. The core premise of the SCM posits that citizenship is a result of one's sense of responsibility toward the community in which they live. In fact, according to HERI (as cited in Komives et al., 2009), "Citizenship, in other words, implies social or civic responsibility. It is the value that responsibly connects the individual and the leadership group to the larger community and society" (p. 151). Ideally, students will recognize that citizenship is more than voting; that it includes forming connections with their communities in activities that range from volunteering to participating in community associations. Students will begin to understand their place within the larger, global community. In this context, citizenship includes levels of engagement (individual, group, institutions, and society). Public administrators must be aware of their own motivations for public service and the level of their personal commitment to their communities to be effective in their public service role. An understanding of citizenship from a personal level will help to infuse this value in students, making them better equipped public administrators-in-training.

As students gain experience with and knowledge in the three defined categories, results are student-centered reflection as well as testing of their abilities and skills in their leadership competency. Ideally, such experiences and knowledge attainment can be intentionally created within public administration classrooms, whereby faculty develop opportunities for students to gain greater self-knowledge, effective community-building skills, and a thorough understanding of how to create positive social change.

APPLYING SCM TO THE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION UNDERGRADUATE CLASSROOM

King and Zanetti (2005) contend that “a critically enlightened and sympathetic administrator can play a crucial role by providing the administrative access necessary to bring about change based on experience as well as expertise” (p. xi). It is important that we provide students with the skills and space necessary to understand and harness their passion for public service into meaningful social change leadership. We can do this by understanding students from a student development perspective.

Many scholars and practitioners in the field of public administration have called for public servants to recognize the importance of social equity and social justice in the practice of public administration (Box, 2005; King & Zanetti, 2005; NAPA, n.d.; Rivera & Ward, 2008). King and Zanetti (2005) and others such as Box (2005) advocate for public servants to be activists and transformational leaders within government agencies, suggesting that positive social change and social equity are not possible without change agents within government.

Public administration faculty are in the classroom teaching students how to be effective public servants, yet much of the curriculum neglects to teach self-awareness and lacks infusion of individual, group, and societal values (Aristigueta, 1997; Mastracci, Newman, & Guy, 2009).

The authors incorporated the following three in-class assignments into their undergraduate public administration curriculum. These assignments challenge students to develop various skills or qualities that are important in the administration of government and are grounded in student development theory—more specifically, the SCM.¹ The following subsections describe the assignments and highlight students’ responses.

Lesson One: Examining Our Lenses

King and Zanetti (2005) suggest that administrators must have “the ability to be self-observant without being overly self-conscious or critical; to be knowledgeable about oneself without becoming inflated or dogmatic; to be stable, yet flexible, resisting the drift toward rigidity and ossification” (p. 127). Thus this in-class exercise, informed by the authors working in leadership programming, challenges students to begin the process of being self-reflective and to “decenter their egos.”

At the beginning of the semester, all students are asked to think about how they are influenced by their communities. Additionally, students are asked to reflect on how their actions affect their respective communities, whether it is where they live or where they volunteer. This assignment implores students to consider their place in society and how power and privilege play a role in whose voices are involved in the decision-making process.

In guiding students to be self-observant within the context of power and privilege, we challenge them to reflect on their own identities, biases, and personal experiences. Through the use of lenses to visually demonstrate the process of being self-observant, students literally see their own identities.

As described in Appendix A, students each receive a pair of clear plastic glasses and permanent markers. Then, as a class, we discuss primary and secondary characteristics commonly associated with identity. Students write their identifying characteristics directly onto the lens of the glasses. When students put on the glasses, they have a visual representation of how their identity influences the way they see the world. To further explore how this concept is relevant to the class, students break into small groups and discuss (a) personal power and privilege and (b) how identity influences decision making. As a large group, the class discusses implications of understanding how one's power and privilege and personal identity are relevant to the decision-making process. At this point in the exercise, it is critical to highlight whose voices are typically represented when setting policy agendas; pulling examples from current events may be helpful for students to better understand this concept. Overall, student responses to this activity vary depending on the group makeup. Most notably, students tend to be most affected by seeing their peers' characteristics displayed.

This assignment can be paired with other class activities, such as a showing of Episode 3: "The House We Live In" from the PBS documentary, *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (Smith, 2003). The program illustrates the impact that people's beliefs, biases, and identity can have on the implementation of public policy (in this instance, the creation of redlining). Regardless of whether the assignment is paired with other materials, its use in the beginning of the class sets the foundation for further exploration of how change begins with being self-reflective.

Lesson Two: Group Dynamics/Community-Building Project

This assignment builds on the previous exercise by providing an opportunity for students to reflect on their individual values in a group setting. The ability to work with others under challenging conditions is paramount to being an effective administrator as well as a change agent. In this assignment, various principles of financial management were used as a vehicle through which students could practice hard skills while simultaneously exploring group dynamics.

During a class period, students review a case study that outlines an organization's mission, vision, strategic plan, and organizational budget (the authors use fictitious

agencies in their courses). Students are divided into small groups based on the major program areas within the organization and asked to develop a program budget for their assigned area. The students are given an entire class period to review the materials and work as a group to develop programming and future initiatives that further the mission of the organization. The caveat is that they must work within strict budget constraints and arrive at a group consensus.

The SCM requires students to understand group dynamics in the context of collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility. While students did not use this language when reporting on their program budgets, they did note the challenges they faced in the assignment. In one undergraduate nonprofit management class, students noted that group dynamics impeded them from making a decision on how to spend the money. One group got hung up on debating the merits of the goal itself, while others could not arrive at a group consensus. However, students were able to articulate the importance of finding common purpose as a group so that they could better handle the challenges of setting organization priorities and making important decisions.

Lesson Three: Engaging in Activism; Three Small-Scale Action Steps

The authors adapted this activity from the radio broadcast “Three Things: How Would You Fix Michigan?” (Shockley, 2010). The goal is to examine self in relation to others and invoke an activist identity. Activism demonstrates students’ abilities to integrate their leadership development, identity development, and commitment to create positive social change. Such activism may take place individually or within a group setting. So, as public administrators encourage students to take this journey through the categories, change—the eighth *C*—is the desired result. This assignment introduces students to issues of social change with the intent of motivating them to take action.

Using Shockley’s (2010) radio broadcast as a framework, this assignment facilitates ways in which students can make a difference in their communities. This radio program, in particular, highlights ideas about how Michigan residents and statewide leaders can “fix Michigan.” Students recognize basic tools and creative ideas regarding how small-scale action steps can create positive social change. Most important, this program provides an ideal foundation for classroom discussions around social change and demonstrates how students can make real, tangible differences within their local community.

At the end of the semester, students expressed their challenge in closing the gap between “armchair activism” and long-term commitments that require engagement with community. Students appeared to grapple with how easy it was to forget about their proposed actions, thus demonstrating lack of commitment and time constraints. This lesson is an important addition to the overarching series of discussions because it reminds students that change cannot come without making a commitment to work alongside others in the community.

CONCLUSION

Anecdotal evidence from the author's classes suggests that intentionally using assignments that challenge students at an individual level, a group level, and a community level are beneficial. Many students have returned after the course is over to discuss how they plan to make a difference in their communities. Some of the students are pursuing applications to serve in the Peace Corps, and others have won prestigious awards for their work in Native American communities. The authors recognize the need to further research the impact of embedding the SCM in the curriculum, and we plan to examine this area in the future.

Students must believe that positive and sustainable social change is achievable. To do so, it is imperative for public administration faculty to understand leadership from a developmental perspective. Harvey White (2007) once noted that "America needs us to believe because we are the ones, public servants, who will provide the space for fulfilling the social contract we have with our citizens. What we believe influences the type of space we provide" (pp. 3–4). It is important for students to believe that they can create change in their communities and in their work. Komives et al. (2009) describe social change as a process of "addressing each person's sense of responsibility to others and the realization that making things better for one pocket of society makes things better for the society as a whole" (p. 10).

The authors of this article contend that we are obligated to serve as facilitators in the learning process of connecting academic coursework with identity development and leadership development so that students are prepared to be agents of social change.

The content knowledge essential to running government and nonprofit organizations will aid institutions and the public administrators who run them in planning their actions, managing their finances, and increasing their spheres of influence. Classrooms can prepare students with the tools necessary to deconstruct institutional barriers and the status quo. True public service can be effective only when it attends to these considerations. The SCM is a tool that can be introduced in public administration classrooms to address these considerations for the purpose of graduating transformative leaders who effect social change through transformative service.

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FOOTNOTE

- 1 Activities for this article were derived from public administration courses taught by Ashley Nickels and Theresa Rowland. All content, background information, and guided questions are products of their co-instruction in an introductory undergraduate public administration course.

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APPENDIX A

Lesson One: Examining Our Lenses

Brief Description

This activity is intended to take place over one 50-minute class period, during the start of the semester, but can be shortened to accommodate course needs. It requires students to work individually and discuss as a large group to develop a consciousness of self in relation to others.

Format

Active Experimentation and Reflective Observation

Number of Participants

This exercise can be done with any size class or in workshop format.

Time Requirements

50-minute class recommended

Learning Outcomes

1. Better understanding of self (SCM values: greater self-awareness—individual values)
2. Better understanding of how we are influenced by our surroundings (SCM values: self in relation to others—group values)
3. Better understanding of how we make decisions based on our lenses. As administrators, we must recognize and appreciate other ways of viewing problems and solutions. (SCM values: controversy with civility—group value, community building—community and society values)

Materials

1. Each student will need a pair of protective eyeglasses (a less expensive alternative would be to provide students with paper 3-D glasses or an image of glasses).
2. Each student will need a marker, preferably a permanent marker.
3. Each student will need a piece of paper for recording their reflections.

Assignment/Exercise Outline

1. Introduce exercise at beginning of semester before the introduction of concepts such as public policy process, decision-making models, and so on.

Description of Project

1. Provide students with a list of commonly used characteristics of identity (i.e. race, ethnicity, gender/gender expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic

- status, and religion as well as secondary identifiers such as political views, veteran status, and familial status).
2. First, on the same piece of paper, have students circle the top 10 identifying characteristics they associate with themselves.
 3. Ask the students to define and write out the top 10 characteristics across the lenses of their glasses; for instance, a student may identify most with her gender and write *woman*.
 4. Ask students to put on their glasses and view the world through their lenses.
 5. With a partner or in a small group, prompt students to tell their peers what they have written. After all have shared, discuss what significance our “lenses” have on how we “see” the world.
 6. Optional pairing: clips from PBS documentary, *Race: The Power of an Illusion* (Episode 3: “The House We Live In”; Smith, 2003).

Discussion and Processing of Project

1. Ask students to share with small groups and then in large group the significance of the project. Ask students to discuss situations in which they were working with or collaborating with a person who did not “see” an issue in the same way. What did they do, and how did it make them feel?
2. Ask students to explore and reflect on their understanding of self in relation to the group; challenge students to visualize the impact our cultural identities have on how we see the world and how we communicate with others.
3. As a homework assignment, ask students to continue reflecting on the exercise by writing in a journal. Provide prompts that reflect the SCM, such as What did you learn about yourself as a result of this exercise? How and why is it important to be self-reflective as a public administrator?

APPENDIX B

Lesson Two: Group Dynamics/Community Building

Brief Description

This activity is intended to take place over one 50-minute class period but can also be used in a workshop or as a semester-long project. It requires students to work in small groups to develop a budget using the principles of fiscal management (can be adapted for both nonprofit and public administration courses) and collaborative team-building skills.

Format

Active Experimentation, Reflective Observation

Number of Participants

25–30, but activity is adaptable to meet group size.

Time Requirements

50-minute class

Throughout course of semester

Learning Outcomes

1. Gain understanding of self (SCM values: increased self-awareness—individual values)
2. Strengthen understanding of group dynamics (SCM values: collaboration and common purpose, and controversy with civility)
3. Increased understanding of how to reach a group consensus, developing a shared vision, and conflict resolution skills. As administrators, we must recognize and appreciate other ways of viewing problems and solutions. (SCM values: controversy with civility—group value, community building—community and society values)

Materials

Case study with defined strategic aims and departmental budgets

Assignment/Exercise Outline

1. Introduce nonprofit financial management including ethics, budgeting, and diversified fund-raising. Use relevant example through media sources.
2. Class assignments, lectures, and discussions—up to point of this project—have established a knowledge base oriented toward general nonprofit management, including nonprofit history, volunteer coordination, leadership, community organizing, and so on.

Description of Project

Adapt project content to course material as necessary.

1. Instructor: Describe the organization, its mission, and its vision. Also describe how the organization supports the community, its overall budget, and strategic aims.
2. Ask students to break into small groups, assuming the roles of departments within the organization. Distribute case study outlining the organization's mission, vision, strategic aims, and departmental budget (actual and projected).
3. Explain that students have 40 minutes to develop goals that support the organization's strategic aim as it relates to their specific department. Ask students to develop plans that include budget expenses (staffing needs, volunteer training, or whatever knowledge content has been discussed in class).

Discussion and Processing of Project

1. Ask questions that help students explore group dynamics within the team. What frustrations did you encounter? Who displayed leadership and followership? Were community needs addressed, and how did your team reach a consensus?
2. Ask students to explore and reflect on their understanding of self in relation to the group and how they approached addressing the needs of the community. In other words, make sure to include questions that explore the elements of the seven Cs of the SCM as they connect with classroom knowledge content.

Note

This activity can be adapted to the length of class or workshop as well as the students' knowledge content of nonprofit/public administration, group dynamics, and social change. This exercise was developed for a nonprofit administration course but could be adapted to meet the needs of other undergraduate public administration classes. It is important for students to understand that they are to assume the role of staff members who are striving to meet the needs of the organization and the community that it serves. As the instructor, observe team dynamics and develop reflection and processing questions accordingly.

APPENDIX C

Lesson Three: Engaging in Activism; Three Small-Scale Action Steps

Brief Description

This activity is intended to take place over the course of the semester. It requires students to work independently to identify and complete actions based on a social issue of importance to them.

Format

Active Experimentation, Reflective Observation

Number of Participants

Activity is adaptable to any size group.

Time Requirements

Throughout course of semester

Learning Outcomes

1. Gain understanding of self and commitment to issue (SCM values: consciousness of self and commitment—individual values)
2. Strengthen understanding of social issues and how they are affected by individuals (SCM values: collaboration and common purpose, and controversy with civility)
3. Gain understanding of social change and activism (SCM values: citizenship—community and society values)

Materials

No materials are required for this assignment.

Assignment/Exercise Outline

1. Introduce via lecture, assigned readings, and class discussion the topics of civic engagements, social change, and activism.
2. Provide details of assignment early in the semester, and allow students at least 4 weeks to complete it.

Description of Project

Adapt project content to course material as necessary.

1. Instructor provides framework for the assignment through course lecture, readings, and discussion before posting the assignment.
2. Students are required to identify a social issue, such as poverty, homelessness, violence, access to health care, child welfare, and so forth.
3. Instructor explains that students must take three action steps to address the

social issue. Examples of large-scale and small-scale action steps are provided. Examples may include writing a letter to the editor, donating or volunteering with a local nonprofit, joining a local group or student organization, attending a protest or issue rally, lobbying your legislator about a current bill, and so on.

4. At the end of the semester, or when the assignment is due, students must draft a reflective paper explaining what they did and the significance of the action for them as well as for the community (whether specific to the organization or the general public).

Discussion and Processing of Project

1. Provide prompts to students to aid in writing their reflection papers. Prompts may include the following questions: How did this assignment affect the way you see your role in the public policy process? Did you meet your goals? If not, what challenges did you face in meeting your goals? Did you feel valued by those people you interacted with (whether it was a nonprofit, government or for-profit organization)? What action steps will you take in the future?
2. Ask students to explore and reflect on their understanding of self in relation to others in the community and how they approached addressing the needs of the community. In other words, make sure to include questions that explore the elements of the seven Cs of the SCM as they connect with classroom knowledge content.