

# Service Leadership Seminar: A Unique Tool for Transition

Kathy L. Guthrie

*The Service Leadership Seminar program at Florida State University is a unique way to assist first-year students with their transition to college while enabling them to continue their commitment to service and leadership. This article explores the impact the Service Leadership Seminar has on students through a mixed methods approach. The Socially Responsible Leader Scale showed a positive shift in students' consciousness of self. Through focus groups, students reported this program as being helpful in their transition and development of personal identities.*

In 2001, the Service Leadership Seminar (SLS) began at Florida State University. This program was created to bring together first-year students who self-identified as being dedicated to community service and leadership before orientation and classes started. This program is coordinated by the Center for Leadership and Civic Education with funding assistance from the Division of Student Affairs and Student Government Association. This four-and-a-half day seminar is designed to provide an introduction to the importance of being a servant leader. Robert Greenleaf (1977) introduced the idea of servant leadership, which asserts that leaders should be servants first and as a result would be leaders. The SLS program is a unique way to assist first-year students with their transition to college while enabling students to continue their commitment to service and leadership. This article explores how students were impacted from participating in SLS, the students' perception of their consciousness of self, and how SLS serves as a transition tool and a personal identity development tool.

## Program Theoretical Basis

The SLS program is based on The Social Change Model of Leadership Development which focuses on enhancing student learning and facilitating positive social change (Higher Education Research Institution [HERI], 1996; Komives, Wagner, & Associates, 2009). The model is designed to aid educators in the development of college students as effective leaders (HERI, 1996; Komives et al., 2009). In terms of leadership itself, the model presumes leadership is a process rather than a position held by an individual, and that process depends on collaboration and intentionality. The model assumes a values-based perspective of leadership that focuses on societal and personal change and growth, as well as a

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Kathy L. Guthrie (kguthrie@fsu.edu) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at Florida State University.

commitment to achieving shared goals.

In this model, leadership development is examined from three perspectives: the individual, the group, and the community/society. Since values are important elements of the Social Change Model, the model proposes seven critical values dubbed the 7 “C’s”. Each element is related to one of the three perspectives. The individual perspective includes consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment. The group perspective includes collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility. The community/social perspective focuses on citizenship (HERI, 1996; Komives et al., 2009). This model provides a strong, yet dynamic framework for the SLS.

## **Implementation of Service Leadership Seminar**

SLS is designed to introduce new first-year Florida State University students to the institution while focusing on the areas of service and leadership. Essentially, the goal is to bring new students together and provide them with the tools for creating positive, sustainable change. During the seminar, students have the opportunity to meet fellow students, staff and faculty, serve at local non-profit agencies, and learn essential leadership knowledge, skills, and values. To better understand this program, a more detailed description of the program structure and schedule follows.

### *Program Structure*

This program provides opportunities for students to explore topics related to leadership and service through large group workshops, community service, small group reflective discussions, and small group problem-solving activities. The combination of large and small group interaction provides multiple opportunities for students to build relationships and learn from a number of people.

Former seminar participants continue their involvement as planning committee members or program facilitators. Planning committee members provide overall guidance and direction for the curriculum development and implementation. Program facilitators co-lead small participant groups throughout the seminar. Together, these small groups provide community service, engage in reflective discussions, and work on problem-solving activities related to leadership and service. Involvement in program facilitation is an opportunity for students to further their leadership development through mentoring new participants.

### *Schedule*

SLS is designed so that each session builds upon the concepts of previous sessions. In order to maximize the learning experience, students are required to attend all scheduled sessions. The students are involved in the seminar from their first day on campus. This early interaction focuses on a seminar introduction,

building relationships, and understanding the overall program. On the mornings of days two, three, and four, small groups of students participate in community service related to social issue areas, such as homelessness, environment, and education. Community service provides opportunities for students to work together, solve problems, build their own community, and learn first-hand about a social issue. The afternoon of days two, three, and four are focused on various components of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (HERI, 1996; Komives et al., 2009), including individual values, reflection, feedback, diversity, conflict, common purpose, effective listening, positive sustainable change, citizenship, and systems thinking.

Through a selective application process and intense schedule, incoming first-year students are exposed to the areas of leadership and service by attending SLS. Leadership and service are explored using a framework that can be widely applied to their future work at Florida State University. The SLS experience provides students with tools for creating positive, sustainable change and essential leadership knowledge, skills, and values.

## Research Design

While researchers in education have found that “qualitative methods are what to use when studying a complex and nuanced world” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 19), several sources of evidence, including quantitative resources, may be used to help support emerging themes and develop converging lines of inquiry (Yin, 2003). The methodology used in this study provided information on 39 of the 42 students who participated in the Service Leadership Seminar in August, 2009. Out of those 39 students, 32 were first-year participants and 7 were past participants who served as facilitators or on the planning committee. Both qualitative and quantitative data assisted in exploring whether this seminar made an impact on first-year students and, if so, how.

### *Socially Responsible Leader Scale*

Quantitative data were collected by utilizing the Socially Responsible Leader Scale (SRLS). This instrument was used before the beginning of the Service Leadership Seminar and then again at the end. The SRLS operationalizes the Social Change Model of Leadership (HERI, 1996; Komives et al., 2009), which is the theoretical framework of the Service Leadership Seminar. The SRLS instrument is comprised of eight separate scales. Each of these scales measures a particular value associated with the Social Change Model (Tyree, 1998). These scales include consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, controversy with civility, citizenship, and change. The SRLS consists of 103 items on which participants self-report using a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Negative items were reverse-scored.

## *Focus Groups*

Qualitative data were collected from two focus groups which occurred two weeks after the program's conclusion. Focus group interviewing is a guided discussion about a particular topic of interest or relevance to the group and the researcher (Edmunds, 1999). Berg (2001) explained that focus group sessions are moderated and should be kept to small groups in order to capture collective thoughts, opinions, and feelings of the respondents.

Generally, five to seven members are adequate to form a focus group (Krueger, 1988). Krueger explained that a smaller number of participants may cause some members to feel too exposed; more may cause some to engage in side conversations. For the purpose of this study, two focus groups of five to six students were conducted. One group consisted of first-year students who just participated in the program, which will be referred to as the participant focus group. The second group consisted of students who were past participants and most recently served as a student facilitator, which will be referred to as the facilitator focus group.

The recruiting strategy and selection criteria for both focus groups were the same. Thirty-nine students provided informed consent and participated in both the pre- and post-Socially Responsible Leadership Scale. An e-mail recruiting these students to participate in a focus group was sent out. Out of the 32 possible participant students, 6 confirmed involvement for the participant focus group. Initially, out of the seven possible facilitators who filled out both the pre- and post-test, six of them were going to participate, but one canceled, leaving five participants in the facilitator focus group. Therefore, six students participated in the participant focus group, and five participated in the facilitator focus group.

## **Student Thoughts on Service Leadership Seminar**

From the SRLS pre- and post-tests and focus groups, themes emerged on how students were impacted after participating in the Service Leadership Seminar. More specifically, students' attitudes regarding and understanding of their consciousness of self were perceived from the pre- to post-test and focus groups. In addition, data suggested that Service Leadership Seminar served as an effective transition tool and a personal identity development tool.

### *Consciousness of Self*

Out of the 13 items related to the consciousness of self scale on the SRLS, eight items provided a general shift to "strongly agree." The five items that were negatively scored demonstrated a shift toward "strongly disagree." While each of the 13 items shifted towards positive outcomes from the pre-test to the post-test after the Service Leadership Seminar, this researcher chose to focus on two items. The following two items in the consciousness of self scale (discussed later) demonstrated significant change through the quantitative data collected and were

discussed in the focus groups conducted with seminar participants and facilitators:

- I am usually self confident.
- I am comfortable expressing myself.

In the SRLS post-test, 18 students responded that they strongly agreed with the statement "I am usually self confident," compared to 10 students in the pre-test. This increase of 21% demonstrated that students felt more self confident after participating in the seminar.

During the participant focus group, one student stated, "SLS really made me confident to be a student here...I am so lucky to have had this experience to transition me into college." This same student went on to say, "I was so nervous to come to college, but being a part of SLS has given me much needed self-assurance." When asked, "What did you learn from the Service Leadership Seminar?" a student, who was a past participant and most recently a facilitator, stated:

Confidence. I mean, I remember how confident I felt after participating in SLS. I cannot imagine what I would be like or feel like if I did not go to SLS. I know with hard work I can accomplish anything. I think that SLS helped me realize that in a new way.

Following the Service Leadership Seminar experience, 32% more students taking the SRLS responded "strongly agree" to the statement, "I am comfortable expressing myself" compared with the students who took the SRLS prior to the experience. One student in the focus group said, "SLS made me comfortable talking to others. This seminar provided a comfortable place for me to express my thoughts and process some of the tough things we are going through as we entered this new time in our life." Another student, who was a past participant and more recently a facilitator, said, "SLS helped me be able to put language around my passions. I had all of these thoughts, and SLS has made me more comfortable talking about those passions."

### *Transition Tool*

Students were asked, "Do you feel that SLS helped you transition into college; if so, how?" All 11 students participating in the focus groups responded that SLS did help them in their transition into college. Two students said that SLS helped them to transition into the campus surroundings. Four students said that the knowledge they gained about the institution and community helped them in their transition. Five students said that the close relationships they made helped transitioning into college easier.

One student who expressed that the seminar helped with transition to campus surroundings stated, "Since SLS was before the campus orientation, I was showing other new students where things were at. That was pretty cool." Another student said, "I actually have a lot of anxiety around not knowing my surroundings... SLS provided a safe space to figure out and become more comfortable with campus." Of the four students who indicated the knowledge they gained helped them with their transition, one said, "Having a common language with a group of other

new students helped me feel more comfortable here.” One student said that SLS participants became “like a family,” which helped with her transition into college. Another student expressed that the close relationships she developed helped her transition: “I feel closer to some of the people I met at SLS than [to] anyone in my high school. I look forward to keeping these friends for a lifetime.” Students’ comments from the focus groups provided narratives on how SLS is a useful transitioning tool.

### *Personal Identity Development Tool*

Nine out of the 11 students participating in the focus groups reflected on how the Service Leadership Seminar helped transform their personal identities. One past participant and recent facilitator said, “I am not sure who I would be now if I was not involved in SLS a year ago. It has changed my identity in college for sure.” Another past participant and recent facilitator agreed, “In high school I did service, but that is not how I identified. Since SLS, I identify myself as a leader in the community service area. Not to sound conceited, but I think I can lead others in positive change.”

Two recent participants also described how their personal identity was changed because of their experience with Service Leadership Seminar. One student said, “I am so thankful for the support in this program and the encouragement around reflection. I am such a different person now than [I was] before SLS. I know more about myself and what I identify with.” Another student stated:

Coming to college freaked me out. I mean, this summer I would sit outside and wonder who I was going to meet and if I was going to fit in. After going through SLS, I have more confidence and have a better sense of who I am and who I want to be. It really is crazy to think how I am one of the lucky, chosen few to be able to start off my college years with such a powerful program. I am blessed that I was chosen and that I mustered up the courage to participate. I can’t imagine what I would be feeling if I did not, and I don’t want to think about it.

## **Implications**

The data collected from students who participated in SLS provide useful applications to orientation, retention, and transition practitioners. As orientation staff members continue to support multiple populations, students involved in community service often need to be connected with other like-minded students. Similar to athletes or students involved in the Greek community, students involved in community service may have a smoother transition into college with a more specific orientation schedule that includes an introduction to the local community and social issues plaguing the community. This specific programming would be a powerful transition tool.

Providing a safe space for students to explore personal topics may also be a worthwhile endeavor for orientation programs. An increase of their consciousness

of self through SLS demonstrates how providing a safe space to explore personal topics such as values benefits students' transition into the new environment and culture of college. Increasing their consciousness of self will not only assist in transition, but it has the potential to benefit student retention as well.

Orientation, retention, and transition professionals need to continue to build relationships with office staff and faculty who may be providing these types of programs. Expanding orientation programs so that seamless learning occurs between pre-orientation programs such as SLS and orientation itself may increase the impact these programs have on the transition and retention of students. Lessons from such pre-orientation programs can be learned and incorporated into all campus orientation programs.

## Conclusion

SLS is a powerful transition tool for first-year students. The Social Change Model of Leadership Development (HERI, 1996; Komives et al., 2009) provides a framework where civic engagement and leadership knowledge, skills, and values can be explored. SLS then provides a structured application to those knowledge, skills, and values learned through workshops, activities, and community service. This study reveals students' perceptions of the impact this seminar had on them. From the SRLS pre- and post-tests and focus groups, students self-reported that this seminar had a positive impact on their transition into college. More specifically, students' attitudes regarding their consciousness of self shifted positively. Additionally, students reported that their involvement in the seminar assisted with their transition and development of personal identity.

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