

Ubuntu Leaders Fellows Program: Addressing Global Challenges Through Community Projects

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Abstract

The Learning Institute's Ubuntu Leader Fellows Program (ULFP) provides undergraduate students partnership opportunities with community agencies and tools to become compassionate leaders through the practice of Ubuntu philosophy, which focuses on connecting all humanity from the local to international level (UNESCO, 2022). The definition of Ubuntu is that a person is a person because of the other person (by virtue of their relationships with others).

Compassion, human relations, and a mutually benevolent life are values emphasized in this value system practiced in Africa. It aims to encourage compassionate leadership, advocacy, and empowerment (Norren, 2022). The 2022/2023 Ubuntu Fellows, with support from their faculty mentors, designed and implemented research projects that address the following: No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health and well-being, Quality Education, and Climate Action. This article presents Ubuntu fellows' work, how it addresses the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) locally and globally, and lessons learned from their participation in the ULFP.

A recent study by Merolla and Jackson (2019) argues that racial disparities in education outcomes remain unchanged and that Black people are predisposed to other social challenges such as poverty and healthcare. For example, it is more common for Black women to die after childbirth and experience disparities in postpartum healthcare (Flanders-Stepans, 2000). Women and children from this group are also disproportionately affected by food insecurity caused by climate change (World Bank Group, 2022) and because of their socio-economic status (Taylor et al., 2019). It

is vital to explore these topics due to their intersectionality and potential to deprive groups and individuals of the chance to thrive in their environments. Ubuntu fellows' projects for 2022-2023 focus on these four issues addressed by the SDGs (2, 3, 4, 13), which pose a major threat to Black women, children, and low-income families.

SDG 2 Zero Hunger: Food Knowledge – Carolina

With the role social media plays today, it is worth seeking to understand the effects

social media has on food knowledge. Food literacy has been defined as:

the scaffolding that empowers individuals, households, communities, or nations to protect diet quality through change and strengthen dietary resilience over time. It is composed of a collection of interrelated knowledge, skills and behaviors required to plan, manage, select, prepare, and eat food to meet needs and determine intake. (Vidgen & Gallegos, 2014, p.54)

With this understanding, social media's role on food knowledge comes down to understanding the mediational processes of Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Observation, imitation, and modeling are the three ways people learn according to Albert Bandura (Fryling et al, 2011). Possible positive effects of social media can induce a change in social work practice to react to content delivery via social media as a principal intervention to improve food security. This preliminary research is essential to understand the importance of adaptive social work practice to meet Personal Learning Environments (PLE) for clients in high usage areas and social influence on impact improvement on food security. The hope is to mark an intervention that is not invasive or requires changes to established relationships with easily accessible social media platforms as an effective yet affordable solution to food security.

SDG 3 Good Health and Wellbeing: Black Maternal Health - Carolina

To reduce poverty and increase food security and global wellbeing, it is crucial to improve maternal health in a community. Black women had the highest incidence of almost all severe maternal morbidity indicators compared to any other racial or ethnic group. Black women in the U.S. are three to four times more likely than White women to die from pregnancy-related

complications (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2021). Black women in some regions of the U.S. face a pregnancy-related mortality risk compared to the incidence of pregnancy-related deaths in some undeveloped nations. This racial imbalance exists in other middle to high income countries with multi-ethnic populations and has not decreased in recent decades (United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2021). In Philadelphia, the most populous city in Pennsylvania, pregnancy-related deaths for black non-Hispanic women sits at 73%. Philadelphia's Non-Hispanic Black average pregnancy related deaths are four times higher than White women pregnancy mortality (Pennsylvania Department of Health, 2022).

Furthermore, pregnancy-associated deaths had high death rates for Non-Hispanic Black women, accounting for 58% of pregnancy-associated deaths even though they accounted for approximately 43% of Philadelphia births during this same period (Maternal Mortality Review Committee, 2021). Also, 54% of the pregnancy-associated deaths occurred more than six weeks after the end of pregnancy while 52% of the pregnancy-associated deaths occurred in women younger than 30 years (Maternal Mortality Review Committee, 2021). While 46% of pregnancy-related deaths were due to cardiomyopathies or other cardiovascular conditions, 23% were due to embolisms (either amniotic or embolic), 12% to infectious processes, 8% to hemorrhage, and 12% to other causes (Maternal Mortality Review Committee, 2021). Non-Hispanic Black women made up for 43% of live births in Philadelphia but accounted for 73% of pregnancy-related deaths from 2013 to 2018. The timeframe for this phenomenon in 77% of pregnancy-related deaths occurred after delivery, with 23% occurring more than six weeks after the end of the pregnancy (Maternal Mortality Review Committee,

2021). 58% percent of women with pregnancy-related deaths had Medicaid insurance (Maternal Mortality Review Committee, 2021) and 23% had private insurance (Maternal Mortality Review Committee, 2021).

Racial disparities in maternal mortality are multifaceted and are impacted by institutionalized racism and prejudice towards Black women who use healthcare systems (National Partnership for Women and Families, 2018). The quality of care provided to all pregnant and postpartum women, especially Black women, will increase if the healthcare system is equipped to create a culture of equity that will enhance maternal health. To address the root causes of the significant racial disparities in maternal health outcomes, implicit bias, and systematic racism must be acknowledged. To lower maternal mortality and morbidity in Philadelphia and throughout the Commonwealth, it is crucial to ensure that pregnant and postpartum women with cardiovascular diseases and substance use problems receive comprehensive care (Maternal Mortality Review Committee, 2021).

SDG 4: Quality Education: Historically Responsive Literacy Framework - Delanie

This project explores how educators can create unique classroom spaces where students can identify and critique their world to envision a more just society. After taking an Early Childhood Education course (ERCH 316), I learned the importance of providing creative opportunities for young children. I also learned about what critical literacy looks like in action. At the end of the semester, my peers and I had the opportunity to be involved in some fieldwork with The Speaking Out Collective at Price Elementary School. The organization consists of artists and teaching artists who are passionate about crafting stories that serve as vehicles for self-

expression. Furthermore, The Speaking Out Collective offers professional development, specialized and tailored curriculum, and live performances to schools. Their mission is to spark deeper conversations, be a catalyst for change and support creativity by helping educators and students to find their unique voice, enhance comprehension, and infuse a joy and love for learning.

Shortly after, I discovered the work of Gholdy Muhammed (2023) and her contributions to education. In this project, I describe Gholdy Muhammed's (2023) equity framework for culturally and historically responsive literacy, which centers around five essential components of literacy: identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy. Furthermore, I examine what organizations exist that enhance students' development of identity, skills, intellect, criticality, and joy. The investigative part of this research will be to examine the overlap between Muhammed's framework and The Speaking Out Collective. I will gather oral histories from teaching artists, artists, and teachers from schools that have participated in The Speaking Out Collective. The goal of this research is to shed light on how it is possible to integrate Muhammed's framework into the classroom through organizations like The Speaking Out Collective.

SDG 13: Climate action: Climate action and awareness in Lancaster County – Katherine

This year, I am continuing to adapt my project from last year. I am working with Sustainable Development Goal #13, which is Climate Action. I have always been a writer and have been tuned in on the effects of climate change for most of my life, so when I got the chance to participate in this program, combining the two felt like my best bet.

My project is a fictional short story that takes place in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, about a teenager who has a politically invested

mother and who must create social change project for school. When their mother comes back from a climate rally and the weatherman on the news reports yet another monster storm moving up the coast, the teenager has the idea to create a campaign to raise awareness of climate change within their area.

This project focuses on different points of climate change from climate refugees, storm runoff, raising temperatures, and severe weather events across the globe. The story’s aim is to raise awareness about the state of our Earth, as well as how climate change can affect areas that are often thought of as fine.

Program Evaluation

The ULFP Peer-Mentor conducted a survey in the last quarter of the 2022-2023 program to measure outcomes. The mixed method survey contains a 16 items survey questions that assess fellow’s experiences in four focus areas before the program and after their participation in the program, and two qualitative questions were included in the survey. The Fellows Networking Team meeting was also reviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the program impact.

Results

The 2022-2023 ULFP evaluation survey data indicates that fellows gain a deeper understanding of global issues as well as practical skills in activism and advocacy by participating in the Learning Institute social justice events and the application of Ubuntu framework. The fellows demonstrate the understanding of the Ubuntu concept through their commitment to partnership, advocacy, and intentions shown in their SDG projects with the aim of making differences in other people’s lives. Our fellows come from diverse backgrounds and work collaboratively throughout the program through the Fellows Network Meetings. In addition, fellows develop partnerships with

local agencies and utilize the supervision provided by their faculty mentors.

| | Before ULFP | | | | After ULFP | | | |
|----------|-------------|-----|-----|-----|------------|-----|------|------|
| | LS1 | GS1 | SJ1 | SC1 | LS2 | GS2 | SJ2 | SC2 |
| FELLOW A | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 |
| FELLOW B | 4 | 4 | 4 | 4 | 5.75 | 6 | 5.75 | 6 |
| FELLOW C | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5 | 5.25 | 5 | 5 | 5.25 |

Table 1: Average scores of responses from each focus area before- a 5 scale point, after - 7 scale point.

Leadership skills -LS, Group work skills: GS, Social Justice Skills-SJ and Sense of Community-SC

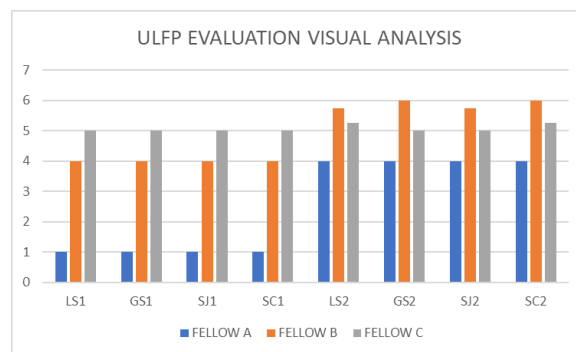


Figure 1: To what extent has the ULFP program improved my knowledge and understanding in this four-focus area, Leadership skills -LS, Group work skills: GS, Social Justice Skills-SJ and Sense of Community-SC?

Lesson Learned

Lessons learned from the previous academic session were implemented in the 2022-2023 academic year, as well as recommendations from the Learning Institute Advisory Board and ULFP alumni. The Learning Institute partnered with Leadership Lancaster in which two of our fellows participated in the inaugural Leadership Lancaster Millersville College Core Class.

We asked fellows to describe their overall experience from participating in the ULF Program and how the program would benefit their career. Here are some responses: “Helps me by looking at different lenses to solve a problem;” “I believe this experience will help

me in my career as I communicate my ideas with coworkers and express my creativity within my work;" "I believe it will benefit me to learn more about my community and how I can take that to influence my writing in the future". Another qualitative question asks about skills they have gained from participation in the ULFP: "Leadership, Initiative skills" "Communication, advocacy, planning" "I have learned a lot about leadership, organization, participation, research, and caring." One fellow commented in their FNT Journal that "It has allowed me to gain more confidence in myself and it has also allowed me to make connections with my peers. Some of the

fellows have provided me with helpful suggestions as well"!

The themes that emerged from the qualitative question responses indicate that students who participate in the Ubuntu Leaders Fellows Program improve their critical thinking ability, caring, communication skills, leadership skills, organizing skills, confidence level, and networking. ULFP demonstrated the role of student leaders in achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). ULFP initiatives can also be implemented at other institutions and communities around the world to develop future compassionate leaders.

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