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Jacob R. Schlange

Tamy Burnett

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Empowering Student Leadership amid Transition: Student-Centered Revision of First-Year Honors Peer Mentoring

JACOB R. SCHLANGE AND TAMY BURNETT

University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Abstract: Precipitated by a surge in enrollment, authors describe the three-phase revision (2017–2021) of a first-year peer mentoring program in honors. Grounded in student input and leadership, large-scale programmatic changes involve curriculum expansion, student leadership development, and co-curricular experiential support. Program objectives, implementation, and outcomes are described.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; group work in education; student leadership development; first-year experience; University of Nebraska–Lincoln (NE)—Honors Program

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INTRODUCTION

While the University of Nebraska–Lincoln’s (UNL) University Honors Program (UHP) has included an element of peer mentoring for many years, the value of peer-to-peer education was largely unrealized prior to a multi-year overhaul of the UHP peer mentoring program begun in 2017. This overhaul coincided with, and was necessitated by, a period of rapid growth in honors enrollment at UNL. The large-scale programmatic changes to the peer mentoring program also aligned with shifts in program leadership, an expansion of the UHP curriculum, and a commitment to intentionally enhancing student leadership development across UHP co-curricular experiences. We

will first examine a brief history of peer education and mentoring programs in a general context before sharing what the UHP's peer mentoring program looked like prior to major changes and what challenges the program faced as a result. We will outline our goals and objectives for undergoing a student-driven programmatic restructuring and explain our process for doing so. Finally, we will evaluate the impact and outcomes of those changes in program structure on our honors student population and, specifically, on our student leaders who have participated in the program as mentors and as members of the leadership team.

Practitioners in the field of higher education have long recognized the value and unique contributions of undergraduate peer educators, and peer mentoring programs have grown significantly in recent decades. UNL has its own rich history of peer mentoring, and indeed, Newton and Ender identify the University of Nebraska as one of the first institutions to make use of undergraduate peer mentoring "as a didactic education strategy," the success of which led to growing use of peer educators to improve retention and other academic outcomes (Newton & Ender, 2000, p. 4).

Since then, the use of peer educators has proliferated to "nearly every aspect of college academic and student service," with increases in the number and types of roles available as well as the delivery methods available for peer education (Newton & Ender, 2000, p. 4). Mentors can have a positive impact on retention and academic success in many ways, including supporting and encouraging students through the initial transition to college as well as sharing information about various resources that the university provides (Jeske & Rode, 1999). Colvin and Ashman identified five different informal roles that may be fulfilled by mentors throughout their mentoring relationship: "connecting link, peer leader, learning coach, student advocate, and trusted friend" (Colvin & Ashman, 2010, p. 125). A peer mentor supporting a first-year student in their transition to college may fulfill any and all of these roles during their time as a mentor.

Just as it has in other areas of higher education, the use of peer mentors as a way of enhancing the educational experience for undergraduates has taken root in honors education. Though these mentoring programs can take many forms, they often coincide with a required first-year seminar for honors students, which provides co-curricular support for first-year mentees while also providing leadership opportunities for upper-level honors students (Johnson, 2009; Wang et al., 2005; Leichter, 2013). Additionally, honors education leaders generally recognize the value that peer mentoring programs

can have in creating community and thus supporting retention efforts of the institution and honors as well as supporting student development (Walters & Kanak, 2016).

Although the literature on peer mentoring in undergraduate honors education includes many examples of various models for mentoring programs and evidence of the impact of mentoring on retention and academic success outcomes, the current research provides few examples of a mentoring program that centers student input in the revision, development, and delivery of curriculum for first-year students.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF HONORS PEER MENTORING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA—LINCOLN

The Nebraska UHP has had a first-year peer mentoring program for several years (over fifteen) prior to the revision discussed in this article. UHP students and staff alike have long recognized the value this programmatic element brings to the UHP experience at Nebraska. Jared Noetzel, a 2020 UHP graduate and two-year student leader in the mentoring program, explained the value of this component for the UHP by calling it “necessary in building community within the honors program. Given that the program [curriculum] is highly individualized, and joint [honors] housing is not required, there needs to be some elements that everyone takes part in, and this takes form in the peer mentoring program. This program allows students to meet others in the program and allows them to form a support network in an unfamiliar environment.”

One distinctive and important element of the UHP peer mentoring program is its leadership structure. In addition to a UHP staff member who is the primary advisor to the peer mentoring program, a small group of about a dozen upperclass students (numbers vary a bit year-to-year) all served as peer mentors in the program at least once prior to being selected for this role. This team—the Honors Peer Mentor Leaders (HPMLs)—is an official, recognized student organization on campus and has a significant amount of responsibility in revising the program curriculum annually and selecting and training the next year’s peer mentors. The HPMLs are selected at the end of the fall term and serve for one year; historically the spring term focuses on recruitment, selection, and training of new mentors while the fall semester focuses on delivery of the peer mentoring program. The overlap from one HPML cohort to the next averages about 40–50% returning peer mentors, although in some years this number is higher or lower.

Key to the revision of the Nebraska UHP peer mentoring program discussed in this article was a commitment to use student leadership in designing and implementing changes. Jared Long, 2019 and 2020 HPML and 2021 UHP graduate, explained the value he and other HPMLs found in this role: “The student leaders were given much autonomy to shape the program as we saw fit, with appropriate guidance from honors [leadership]. [. . .] I found that responsibility motivating. I knew the actions I took would have an immediate, significant impact on the student experience. As such, I wanted to ensure those actions were intentional and considered.” He further reflected, “Of course, that’s how it should be for a peer mentor program. [. . .] This autonomy promoted leadership growth and professional development through trial and error.”

Before the revision, entering students (largest prior class size: 475–500 students) enrolled in a zero-credit course, primarily for communication and tracking purposes. They were divided into small groups of ten to twelve and assigned to an upper-class peer mentor, whom they had ostensibly chosen for themselves through a preference form during summer orientation to the university prior to beginning college. In practice, many incoming students were randomly assigned as cumulative preferences were often unbalanced in favor of mentors listed earlier in the directory of possible mentors. In late summer, mentors were then given their mentees’ contact info and directions to contact the students before fall campus move-in.

Once students were on campus, the peer mentoring program ran for the first eight weeks of school, although the first week did not have prescribed content. Mentors were responsible for finding a time everyone in their small group could meet, choosing a public location (usually a public space in the honors residence hall), and then reviewing assigned content with their mentees each week in an informal, hour-long meeting. The weekly curriculum focused primarily on transition-to-college topics such as the campus academic resource centers, student life resources like mental health services or the campus recreation center, and a tour of the honors residence hall, which included study rooms, classrooms, and the honors offices. Since many of these small-group meetings took place in the honors hall, honors staff had ample opportunity to observe these meetings in passing. Although some mentors were skilled at making their meetings engaging and fun, many struggled to do so, and often small group meetings looked like the mentor reading out of their curriculum notebook—far from the kind of engaging co-educational experience we desired for both mentors and mentees.

Zachary VanRoy, a 2018 and 2019 HPML who was heavily involved in the first phase of revisions to the mentoring program, summarized the challenge: “If a mentor can read it from an outline, a mentee can read it from a pamphlet or website later. The benefit of a program like [peer mentoring] is to forge connections between members of the diverse honors community, through shared interests, goals, or skills that would have otherwise never been formed. The rest will take care of itself.” With this perspective in mind, the HPMLs set out to re-envision this cornerstone of the Nebraska UHP experience. To address the interest in improving the quality and experience for new students and mentors and to differentiate the UHP intro course from existing transition-focused courses on campus, the UHP undertook a revision of its peer mentoring program.

PHASE ONE:

CLASS FORMAT AND DELIVERY CHANGES

This major revision of the program began in January 2018 with a new group of HPMLs and a UHP staff member who was new to the role of advising this program. At the end of the fall 2017 semester, first-year students in the peer mentoring zero-credit course had been asked to complete a survey that collected information about their perceptions of the usefulness of the curricular content addressed in the course. The results of the 482 responses (82% of enrolled students) revealed that first-year students found much of the curricular content useful but were seeking increased connection with other students and a greater sense of community. Of special concern was that, of the required curriculum topics assigned to all mentors to discuss, nearly every topic had at least some students respond that the topic did not come up in their peer mentor group. Although some of these responses may be accounted for by students being absent on a given day (although that should have been made up in a one-on-one setting) or not paying attention all the time, the rate was serious enough to reinforce one primary concern with the current model: that the communication of information was inconsistent given the delivery of important information by so many peer mentors with limited training.

The UHP staff member sourced some introductory readings for the HPMLs about High-Impact Practices (HIPs) to help them think about how to increase intentionality in the curricular redesign. The staff member then coached the students in thinking through the first dramatic revision of the course for the fall of 2018, which has continued to be refined in subsequent

years. The primary changes proposed by the HPML student leadership team for this first phase were focused on creating greater consistency and value of the experience for both new students and peer mentors. These changes included extending the experience from eight to twelve weeks (in a fifteen-week semester); incorporating regular class meetings where the more experienced and trained HPMLs led curriculum delivery; introducing new students to HIP-related experiences on campus (called “Honors Impacts”) in small-group, mentor-led activities; and revising training for peer mentors with more emphasis on professional development (moving from an information-delivery model of training to a skill-building model).

The fall 2018 delivery of this first round of the new peer mentoring course (now a graded one-credit course titled “Honors Community: Peer Mentoring”) had some successes and some challenges. Emily Jezewski, a 2019 UHP graduate and the 2018 HPML president, explained the positive impacts of these changes from the student leader viewpoint: “This was a huge step forward for the program as [. . .] students were able to see how many peers were in the program with them,” thereby enhancing a sense of community that students could otherwise be missing. Jezewski continued, “It was also an excellent way for new students to interact with more upperclass [students], beyond just their peer mentor. This course allowed for questions to be answered in a large group setting, which helped to show students that if they had a specific question, it was more than likely another student had the exact same question.”

Jzewski’s observations were reinforced by first-year students. Mentee end-of-term survey responses indicated the class largely achieved its goals of helping students orient to college, with 91% of the 597 respondents answering this question positively and 94% of students indicating that their peer mentor was a positive resource for them.

The biggest challenge in the format change was the move from small groups that could meet nearly anywhere to the centralized curriculum delivery model, necessitating the use of large lecture hall classrooms, all of which had traditional auditorium seating that hinders the types of pedagogy the UHP champions, which focuses on community-building, collaboration, and small-group discussions. Despite this challenge, the first phase of revision was successful overall. In addition to creating a foundation on which the peer mentoring program could continue to build, supporting ever-increasing class sizes effectively, the process of this revision benefitted the peer mentors and HPMLs. “My favorite part was creating the curriculum and identifying areas

that needed [to be] strengthened and/or changed,” explained Jezewski. She continued: “It was an opportunity to really make an impact and help an even larger group of students transition to college. The HPML group also became quite close, and I formed some very strong friendships throughout my time as a leader.”

PHASE TWO: CURRICULUM REFINEMENT

Building on the successful phase one revisions, the 2019 HPML group chose to focus phase two revisions on substantially reframing and revising the curriculum. The previous year’s revision had introduced the idea of more intentionally connecting first-year students to HIPs on campus through balancing the delivery of large section “lecture” content (about a hundred students per section) with small group activities led by the peer mentors called “Honors Impacts” (HIs). The HIs in phase one were led by the 6–8 mentors assigned to a specific lecture section (resulting in 6–8 HIs offered each of three times in the semester). Any student in the section (and occasionally in another section if extreme circumstances warranted) could sign up for any mentor’s HI, although enrollment caps on HIs strove to ensure balance of the small-group size. This structure was intended to connect first-year students with HIs tailored to their individual interests and also provide more flexibility of scheduling; most HIs occurred during class time, but some required more than fifty minutes, and each lecture section offered one HI per module that occurred outside of the regular class time.

Jess Humphrey, a 2018 and 2019 HPML, explained the value of the HIs and their structure by emphasizing their impact on the peer mentors and their development: “By challenging [the mentors] to design their own Honors Impacts [. . .], I believe they had more buy-in into the program than previously where the majority of the content was delivered from a pre-prepared set of curriculum they didn’t have or feel they had ownership in.” Humphrey further explained that “these changes translated into increased involvement and more beneficial interactions with their mentees.” The HI design was not perfect, however, and overall feedback on that year’s class indicated that many first-year students wanted a deeper, more meaningful relationship with their individual mentor and peer mentor small group.

To achieve this goal, in phase two the HPMLs introduced additional touchpoints and in-class interactions for the peer mentor groups (one mentor

and 7–9 first-year students). Additionally, the UHP was able to secure use of a new meeting space on campus for this class to meet with round tables seating ten people. The new meeting room allowed members of each peer mentor group to sit together with their mentor during each of the class lecture meetings. This change substantially enhanced the class experience for first-year students and mentors. Because of this increased interaction in the lecture class meetings, the HPMLs elected to keep the structure that first-year students could join an HI led by any mentor in the section. In phase three, the subsequent year, we moved to a policy of requiring first-year students to attend only HIs led by their designated mentor (with exceptions for unusual circumstances if needed) and having all HIs occur during the assigned class time. These changes occurred, in part, due to a need to use contact tracing protocols for in-person classes and activities during fall 2020. Kaylie Trumble, a mentor in fall 2020 and an HPML in the subsequent two years, characterized this change as beneficial. She explained that “mentors were able to ask their mentees what they would like to learn about, allowing conversation about mentee goals and questions, and then empowering the mentor to dive into what their mentees would like to further explore.”

In addition to changes to the location and thus experience of the lecture section meetings, the HPMLs chose to engage in a dramatic overhaul of the curriculum in three key ways. The first was moving away from transition-to-college content that is being offered elsewhere on campus and organizing the curriculum into three primary modules, bookended with a focus on various honors requirements and expectations. The modules were health and well-being; academics and professional development; and global and community engagement. The HIs offered in each period also shifted to align with these modules. For example, the first large lecture topic was Health and Well-Being, so the HIs in the two weeks following this lecture class meeting focused on campus experiences related to that topic. Academics and Professional Development occurred mid-semester both to align with campus career fairs and to precede registration for the next semester’s courses, reinforcing previous content about honors curricular requirements. Global and Community Engagement partnered with the UNL director of national and international fellowships, who led an activity related to identifying fellowship opportunities relevant to each student during the lecture class period.

Jared Long, the chair of the 2019 HPML curriculum committee, explained the value of this “strategic reorientation of all elements of the program to center on a three-part framework for success as a first-year [UHP] college

student.” He said, “Before, I think the discrete program requirements, such as required one-on-one meetings, Honors Impacts, and classroom lecture, lacked context for students, contributing to less engagement from them than what might have been achieved.” He explained that although he and other HPMLs could see the intentionality of these elements, “student feedback often suggested that the connections among those parts were unclear, making the program feel like an obligation rather than an opportunity.” As a result, he led the curriculum committee in the key revision because, as he explained, “by grounding each program piece in at least one prong of the framework, we showed students the intentionality behind what we were asking of them, increasing the legitimacy of the program in their eyes and facilitating greater engagement.”

The second big curricular change was connecting the syllabus and assignments to UHP-wide learning outcomes identified the previous year by UHP leadership: communication skills, problem-solving, transfer of knowledge from one context to another, and developing skills for lifelong learning. These learning outcomes were simultaneously being integrated into other UHP required courses. To support the integration of the learning outcomes into this course, the HPMLs added critical reflection assignments following each HI aimed at helping students connect the dots between the learning outcomes and their individual experiences in the course. This change was supplemented by introducing a UHP-developed rubric for active learning to evaluate participation and engagement in each of the larger lecture class periods. Like the learning outcomes, this active learning rubric was integrated into other UHP courses. The HPMLs recognized the value of increasing the continuity of experiences across the UHP four-year curriculum, especially as it contains many opportunities for customization by each student.

The third major change was the integration of a new on-campus initiative called Husker Student POWER. Drawing on a common cheer at campus sporting events, Husker (short for the Nebraska mascot “Cornhuskers”) POWER is an acronym focused on instilling the following practices in students: Purpose, Ownership, Well-Being, Engagement, and Relationships. This acronym is introduced to students in the summer during their orientation and integrated into a number of campus-wide touchpoints for first-year students. The HPMLs integrated intentional connections to the POWER elements into the lecture class meetings, and the mentors integrated them into HIs by asking students to articulate the connection of their HI experiences to at least one element in their HI reflections. Perhaps most significantly, the

HPMLs identified the value of integrating the POWER elements into the curriculum to align with other campus initiatives without being guided to this understanding by their supervising UHP staff advisor.

PHASE THREE: ENHANCING PEER MENTOR TRAINING (AND PANDEMIC PIVOTS)

Based on the successes of the first two phases of revision, the 2020 HPML team initially identified enhancing mentor training and professional development as their primary goal for phase three. The reasoning behind this goal was to better equip mentors for their leadership role in the co-development and delivery of the course curriculum through their HIs as well as for future leadership roles they might hold personally and professionally.

However, the global coronavirus pandemic also required the HPMLs to refine their own skills in adaptation and flexibility, as all plans had to be revised once it became clear that the fall 2020 semester would be different than previous years. Because the annual cycle for the peer mentoring program begins in January, significant work for the fall 2020 class had already been completed by March, when the COVID-19 pandemic required the 2020 HPMLs to pivot their plans. Mentors had already been selected; the curriculum outline and revision focus for the year had already been established; and logistical details had already been addressed. Although pandemic-related issues required some revision, the peer mentoring program was well-positioned to succeed despite the challenging circumstances.

On our campus, the spring 2020 term moved entirely online starting in mid-March. Campus resumed mostly in-person operation by the start of the fall term in August, with some larger classes moving online for large lectures or employing hybrid delivery models. Most classrooms, including the three honors classrooms, had cameras and microphones installed during the summer to facilitate simultaneous in-person and online synchronous course delivery. The UHP was able to shrink individual class section sizes slightly to comply with newly identified classroom capacities, allowing all students to attend in-person class meetings simultaneously, with exceptions made for individual situations as needed.

For the peer mentoring course, the class had already been moved from the previous year's large meeting space to a classroom in the UHP residence center, requiring the section size to shrink to about fifty. The classroom allows

tables to be moved into small group pods so that mentoring groups may sit together and maintain that element of interaction. Luckily, the university's guidance about social distancing in classrooms was established early enough to allow us to shrink the section sizes before new student enrollment in the summer. The reduction in section size, in combination with the addition of two more sections, allowed the peer mentoring class sections to still meet in person. Unluckily, social distancing protocols required the classroom furniture to be arranged in traditional rows with spaced out seating rather than the more pedagogically desirable mentor group pods. HIs occurred outdoors whenever possible or in larger spaces indoors where appropriate social distancing could be observed, and video conferencing options were used as needed for groups with required medical accommodations or where not all students were on-campus.

Of course, as fortunate as we were in not having to move the course and peer mentoring program completely online, the impact of the pandemic was substantial. In 2020, Jared Long was the peer mentoring president, and he and his team had much more ambitious revisions planned, but

COVID and the ever-changing guidelines resulting therefrom demanded strong, central management to ensure a timely, coordinated, and flexible plan in the face of uncertainty. Time spent responding to COVID might otherwise have been spent designing team-building exercises for groups of mentors, facilitating collaborative Honors Impact planning sessions, or recruiting more intentional skill-building speakers and presenters [for mentor training] to promote professional development among mentors.

Nonetheless, this cohort of HPMLs handled an extremely difficult situation with perseverance and grace, making the best of imperfect circumstances.

One area in which the HPMLs were especially successful was revised training for mentors. The original idea for this year was to move a significant portion of training to the fall semester (previously most training occurred in the spring). Instead, much of the mentor training moved to an asynchronous model deployed through Canvas, our institution's learning management system. The HPMLs worked throughout the summer to design visually engaging module pages, record interesting and useful videos, and create comprehensive training materials that were fun and engaging. They also planned three in-person training sessions with mentors spaced throughout the fall semester.

As pandemic restrictions loosened, the 2021 HPMLs retained some of the changes that they saw most beneficial, particularly in mentor training.

They chose to continue offering a segment of their training asynchronously as a mentoring “primer” before their initial in-person training. Doing so allowed them to provide essential content in a place that remained accessible to mentors who might need to access it later while also freeing up additional time during a spring training and four subsequent fall training sessions for team building, discussion, and more in-depth content. According to Kaylie Trumble, who chaired the HPML training committee in 2022, these in-person training sessions were critical to mentor development:

I feel that the impact and value from these trainings stems from the convivial atmosphere at the meetings and the opportunity to learn from other mentors. [...] By creating trainings that are collaborative, informative, and led in a sociable manner, mentors are able to continue their growth in becoming the best mentor they can be for their mentees and themselves.

All these changes to training, which were driven primarily by the HPML team, have led to mentors feeling more prepared to plan and lead HIs and also better equipped to facilitate discussion during in-class sessions.

EVALUATING IMPACT AND OUTCOMES FOR MENTORS AND THE UHP

A key benefit of the new honors peer mentoring structure was the opportunity it provided for HPMLs to gain professional experience as they supervised a small team of mentors, presented content to first-year students during class meetings, and developed leadership skills by handling situations that arose in and out of the classroom.

One key area of growth identified by several former HPMLs was their ability to speak confidently in large-group settings. “Serving as an HPML helped me gain confidence as well as developed my public speaking skills,” said Erika Swenson, a May 2021 graduate of the UHP. “In my first job post-college, I utilized these skills every day as I spoke to large groups.”

Additionally, the experience as an HPML better prepared students for graduate and professional school. Jess Humphrey, who graduated the UHP in 2020 and completed a master’s degree in a scientific discipline in 2022, shared that, “as a teaching assistant in my graduate program, I was in a position where I was helping to develop curricula for the experiments, grading laboratory reports, and meeting with students.” She further explained that “these were all tasks I had completed previously as an HPML. Having that

previous experience allowed me to have a greater impact on the students and the course itself. As I look to continue in academia, I know my role as an HPML will continue to benefit me long into the future.”

Similarly, Zachary VanRoy, a 2019 UHP graduate who is currently completing an MD/PhD program, said that the HPML role “did a lot to inform both my personal and professional development, through highlighting education, mentorship, and teaching as core activities which I wanted my future career to incorporate.” Although he had this career pathway in mind throughout his undergraduate years, VanRoy wrote that “the career of a physician scientist can be frighteningly diverse and I had no clear picture of what I wanted this to look like. Through [the UHP] mentoring program, I found a passion for mentorship, which in the technical world of medical research is an everyday activity. I also found a passion for education, both through one-on-one and group teaching as well as didactic education.”

HPMLs also pointed to the lessons they learned about leadership and their own leadership style while serving in the role under the guidance of UHP staff. One such student leader was Troy Scheer, a 2022 graduate of the UHP, who is now enrolled in a nursing program. “The role gave me a unique opportunity to develop and strengthen my leadership skills,” Scheer said, and it “provided me with a safe space I could use to grow as a leader and always feel comfortable turning to a role model for advice.” Although the peer mentoring program does have a hierarchical structure, Scheer did not find this hierarchy to create barriers, indicating that “the role of HPML taught me how to lead my peers in a manner that reminded them that they were my equal and their voice mattered and was respected. . . . I will continue to adhere to this style of leadership in my future endeavors.”

Similarly, Jared Long, who is currently in law school, highlighted the HPML role as the most impactful of his many undergraduate leadership roles, including serving as the UNL student body vice president. He explained that “I had significant autonomy to shape a program directly and immediately touching nearly 650 students. [...] I had a vision for the future of the program that had been cultivated by three previous years of experience at all levels in the organization.” He explained that the circumstances of his leadership as HPML president during the 2020 pandemic pivot meant that “I was forced to adapt that long-standing vision to fit the realities of an unprecedented moment. I had to be nimble to quickly and effectively shift program plans in response to fluid guidelines. I had to think creatively with my teammates to create meaningful opportunities for social engagement and community building—the fundamental purposes of the program—in a socially distanced

world.” Overall, Long summarized his experience by saying, “my time as an HPML was a masterclass in flexibility, which left the greatest impact on my personal leadership.”

Whether the long-term impact for student leaders was professional or personal development—or both—the HPML role clearly provided these students with the best, most meaningful kind of co-curricular experience. The intentional choice by UHP staff to afford significant buy-in and contribution by student leaders benefited both the mentoring program, by strengthening and enhancing it in meaningful ways, and the student leaders by enriching the growth and development opportunities available to them. The success of this program has encouraged the UHP to increase opportunities in other co-curricular experiences for students to contribute to, change, and co-create their learning by offering them significant and substantive stakeholder roles.

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The authors may be contacted at
tburnett2@unl.edu.