

Building Community Through Mentoring Adult Learners

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Abstract

The Volunteer UCF Community Connectors and Community Builders Program provides a connection between students and their community. The goal is to develop meaningful service opportunities for UCF students that contribute measurable results and systemic change through capacity building among adult learners. The ongoing, sustainable service experience for students may take place in the forms of internships, service-learning courses, and intrinsically motivated volunteer opportunities. This service opportunity is reflected in The Golden Circle illustration where we began with the “why – ” to create sustainable community impact, and worked our way out to the “how – ” utilizing community builders and community partners, and finally the “what – ” to provide skilled volunteers seeking service-learning and intrinsic volunteerism. The Adult Literacy League, as a community partner, requires building capacity to serve adult learners. These proceedings will highlight synergy between a university-based community service program and a partnering community agency serving adult learners.

Key Terms and Definitions

Capacity Building:

Provides a basis for a comprehensive approach toward democratization (Dryzek, 2008).

Community Engagement:

Community engagement is described as the collaboration “between higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Driscoll, 2009, p.6).

Golden Circle:

The Golden Circle is a type of process model developed by Simon Sinek and is the result of research into the success of the world's most influential companies and its leaders. When asked why their consumers choose their company, the strategic leaders explained that they led with the “why” question. They wanted to know what drove their customers to their business rather than how to make a profit. This led to the development of a three-circle model called *The Golden Circle* (Sinek, 2009).

Service-Learning (SL):

According to the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), service-learning combines serving the community and student learning in a way that improves both the community and the student. Service-learning involves active student participation, fosters civic responsibility, and integrates an educational or academic component (“Principles and Concepts of SL and CBR,” n.d.). Similar to general community service, service-learning may be voluntary or mandatory where service activities can take place within or outside the school. Service-learning also draws lessons from critical analysis activities like classroom presentations, direct writing and group discussion, in addition to organized thoughtful reflection (Spring, Grimm, & Dietz, 2008).

Background

Traditional mentoring has historically been defined as a mentee entering into a supporting and unidirectional relationship “in which the mentee is the subservient role, molded by someone of greater age, wisdom, or position, who appears capable and complete” (Kochan & Trimble, 2000, p. 21). Thirty years of studies on mentoring provide guidance to bring about positive outcomes for mentees when the mentor promotes behaviors such as building trust with their mentee, offering acceptance, open communication, and respecting mutuality (Crosby, 1999). This case study investigates the relationship between a seasoned organization, the Adult Literacy League, and

a new initiative, Volunteer UCF's Community Connector program. This case study challenges mainstream literature to answer a crucial question, how do traditional college-age students perceive the value of their role in mentoring adult learners?

Initiating and maintaining mentoring and tutoring opportunities for adult learners takes leadership and collaboration. According to Rice (2015), Collaborative Leadership provides a leadership paradigm that has the capacity to bring together a diverse group of stakeholders to solve the complex challenges that adult education, as well as many other organizations, face today" (p. 406). Rubin (2009) defines collaboration as a "purposeful relationship in which all parties strategically choose to cooperate in order to achieve shared or overlapping objectives" (p. 2).

According to Hulquist (2015), "Meeting the needs of the adult student population in today's evolving global economy is a challenge being addressed by colleges and universities across the country" (p. 461). Wisseman and Verloop (2009) forecast the next development in higher education will be comprised of an increase of collaborative efforts with the surrounding community (Hultquist, 2015). This includes mentoring the adult learner. The purpose of these proceedings is three-fold; (1) The development of the UCF program based on the Golden Circle model, (2) The value of the university/community agency partnership to sustainable volunteerism, and (3) the role of the non-traditional ages in the mentor/mentee relationship. Two measures of college experience are represented by the amount of time and energy students put into their coursework and other educational opportunities, and an institution's use of resources to create opportunities for student learning and involvement (Truitt, 2013).

These opportunities include mentoring opportunities. According to Astin (1999), involvement is an asset of energy yielding positive student outcomes. Student involvement happens along a continuum and is measured both qualitatively and quantitatively. Student learning and development are openly associated with the quantity and quality of student involvement. Additionally, the effectiveness of educational policy and practice is reflected by the

capacity building of a practice or policy to increase student involvement (Astin, 1999). “Besides enrolling for classes, getting involved is the single most important thing one can do as a student...” (Plante, Currie, & Olson, 2014, p. 89). Community engagement is one example of involvement.

Community engagement is described as the collaboration “between higher education and their larger communities (local, regional/state, national, global) for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity” (Driscoll, 2009, p. 6). Many institutions of higher education have an office or center of community engagement. At the University of Central Florida, Volunteer UCF (VUCF) is an internally funded Student Government Association agency that is housed within the Office of Student Involvement. “It is the mission of Volunteer UCF to promote civic engagement and education on various social issues to the UCF student body” (Plante, Currie, & Olson, 2014, p. 90).

The Volunteer UCF board of directors includes a Student Director, Assistant Student Director, a Marketing team, and social topic directors. Student leaders – ranging from traditional to transfer and nontraditional to adult learners, become expert educators in one of twelve social topics: Animal Awareness, Arts & Recreation, Civic Engagement, Different Abilities, Education & Literacy, Elderly & Veterans Awareness, Environment, Health, Humanitarian Relief, Hunger & Homelessness, Relationship Violence Awareness, and Youth & Mentoring. Student leaders work with their committee members to coordinate and implement episodic volunteer and educational events around their social topic to engage the student body and larger community.

The Alternative Break Program falls under VUCF where coordinators plan week-long service events based on the social topics and takes place during winter and spring breaks. Some VUCF large-scale signature service events include Knights Give Back, UCF’s largest day of service – attracting over 1,500 students and alumni to serve the Central Florida community; Day and Knight of Service, Volunteer UCF’s 24-hour service event to serve the region; and the Volunteer Summit, VUCF’s largest educational event where

nonprofit organizations promote their agency to the student body with the anticipation that those who are interested will volunteer with them. Approximately 6,500 student volunteers participated in over 400 service and educational events serving more than 35,000 hours and supplementing their budget by more than \$13,000 in fundraising, in-kind donations, and mini-grant awards during the 2015-2016 academic year.

Nonprofit leaders across the region often cite the need for consistent volunteers. This need led Volunteer UCF to use the Golden Circle model to pilot a new program, Volunteer UCF's Community Connector and Community Builder Program. Community Connectors pair students' interests, social topic interest, and availability via an online survey and follow-up consultation, with nonprofits and ongoing service opportunities to make a larger impact.

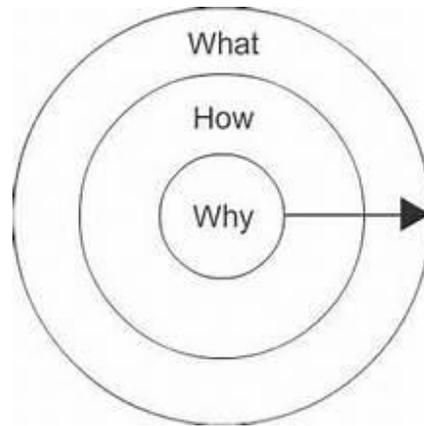
Golden Circle Model

The Golden Circle is a process model developed by Simon Sinek (2009) – and is the result of research into the success of the world's most influential companies and its leaders. It is a process by which one begins with the “why” then works toward the “how” and finally the “what.” For example, when asked why their consumers choose their company, the strategic leaders explained that they led with the “why” question. They wanted to understand why their customers choose their company over competitors, rather than simply asking how to make a profit. This led to the development of a three-circle model called *The Golden Circle* (Sinek, 2009).

The Golden Circle consists of 3 concentric circles. The innermost circle is the *why*, the middle circle is the *how*, and the outermost circle is the *what*. The *Why* describes the drive, belief, and inspiration that organizations possess and, regardless of size, communicate from the inside. The *How* describes the process by which the organization does what it does, the explanation for why their product or service is better or different when compared to another's. The *What* is the product and/or service the organization provides to its clientele. Most organizations focus on the “what” and move inward toward the core;

however, when using the Golden Circle, the effective leaders begin with the “why” and move outward (Sinek, 2009). This is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Simon Sinek’s (2009) *Golden Circle*



From Theory to Practice

Building strong communities requires building capacity. Volunteer UCF launched its Community Connector program during the 2015 academic year to match college students to partners in the local community. The purpose of the Volunteer UCF Community Connectors and Community Builders program is to provide a connection between students and their community. The goal is to develop meaningful service opportunities for UCF students that contribute to measurable results and systemic change through capacity building in community agencies. The Adult Literacy League is the example used in this case study.

The ongoing, sustainable service experience for students may take place in the forms of internships, service-learning courses, and intrinsically motivated volunteering opportunities. The experiences are reflected in The Golden Circle illustration where we began with the “why” (to create sustainable community impact), and worked our way out to the “how” (utilizing community builders and community partners), and finally the “what” (to provide skilled volunteers who are looking for opportunities in service-learning courses, internship, and intrinsic volunteerism).

The Community Connector program utilized three Federal Work Study students to market the program to Volunteer UCF's most frequented nonprofit organizations. These nonprofits were invited to conversations about establishing deeper, more meaningful service and project leadership opportunities for students, their agency, and the larger community. Twenty nonprofit organizations completed applications to become resources for students looking to participate in long-term service. Following conversations with nonprofits, the community connectors began marketing the program and encouraged those seeking ongoing volunteerism opportunities to reach out to a community connector and begin the process.

After making contact with a community connector, the student seeking volunteer opportunities, a.k.a. the community builder, takes a volunteer interest survey. Once complete, a face-to-face meeting takes place between the community connector and the community builder to review the volunteer interest survey. Based on the volunteer's schedule, skill set(s), and social topic interest(s), the community connector makes recommendations of partner organizations for the community builder to explore. Once a partner is decided upon, the community connector 'connects' the community builder and nonprofit agency via email and the community builder begins serving at the organization. In this case study, the Community Connectors are traditional undergraduates who are Federal Work Study students from UCF; the location is the Adult Literacy League, and the Community Builder is a graduate student from UCF.

Adult Literacy League: A Case Study

The Adult Literacy League was one of the first organizations to complete the Community Connectors application and was the first partner to receive a community builder. This particular community partner requires building capacity of their mission to serve adult learners. The Adult Literacy League assists adults seeking employment, economic self-sufficiency, driver's license, and citizenship. The League also educates adults in reading, writing, math, spelling, and computer skills. There is a lab for students to prepare for

their GED, and participate in Adult Basic Education (ABE) courses. Additionally, Adult Literacy League works with non-native students within the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program. Adult learners from the Adult Literacy League often take college courses at higher education institutions such as UCF.

Carina (her real name being de-identified), a graduate student in Public Administration at UCF, was the first community builder to be matched to an organization. With her availability, enthusiasm for mentoring adult learners, and skill sets such as tutoring and mentoring non-native students, she was matched with the Adult Literacy League. After on-site orientation, Carina was paired with a family from Egypt to begin tutoring the mother in English in order to prepare her for employment. Carina's semester-long service project began in January 2016.

About half-way through her tutoring experience with the Adult Literacy League, further strategic dialogue took place to get a sense of how the program was progressing. Carina's service to the Adult Literacy League was used as a case study for program evaluation with the Volunteer UCF Community Connector and Community Builder Program. Several themes were discovered including involvement, tutor experience, lessons learned, and recommendations with the information being illustrated in several tables.

When asked the reasons for becoming involved in the VUCF Community Connector program, Carina explained that her goal was to volunteer for a service project and give back to the Central Florida community. This information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Involvement

Theme	Questions	Codes	Quotes
Involvement	How did you get involved with Volunteer UCF's Community Connector program, and how did that lead you to the Adult Literacy League?	Give back	"I decided that I wanted to <i>give back</i> to the Central Florida community by taking on a <i>volunteering project</i> ."
		Volunteering	
		Interest survey	"I got in contact with them, and I filled out an <i>interest survey</i> , where I talked about my <i>skill set</i> , my social topic of interest, and also my availability. After that initial contact was established, we scheduled a consultation and we were able to sit down and talk about the different volunteering opportunities, which is when the Adult Literacy League came up."
Skill set			
Social topic of interest			

Carina explained that prior to joining the community builders program; she had tutored fellow students on several occasions. She was a conversation partner at the Center of Multicultural Multilingual Studies at UCF and also mentored Portuguese students at the university. She also assisted Brazilian students with the application process at American universities. When working with an adult learner older than she, Carina explained that it was a reciprocal relationship; she was able to help academically while she learned life lessons from her mentee. Conversely, when asked what her mentee's perception was of working with someone younger than her, Carina explained that at first, it was a shock for her, but after rapport and trust were established, age was not a factor. When asked about working with someone who was pursuing the 'American Dream,' Carina responded that at first, there were unrealistic expectations of the American Dream; one must work on learning the characteristics of a new culture and eventually assimilate to that culture. Carina expressed that she felt responsible for providing the right resources to her mentee so that she could be successful in the United States. This information can be found in Table 2.

Table 2: Tutor Experience

Theme	Questions	Codes	Quotes
Tutor Experience	Before starting at the Adult Literacy League, had you tutored before?	Tutoring	“I was a <i>conversation partner</i> for the Center of Multicultural Multilingual Studies at the University of Central Florida, I was a conversation partner for the Portuguese students at UCF, and I was also a <i>mentor</i> with the National Brazilian Student Association helping Brazilian students apply to American Universities”
	Did the Adult Literacy League provide you the necessary training needed to succeed as a tutor?	Conversation Partner	
		Mentor	
		Mandatory Orientation	
	What is it like working with and adult learner who is older than you are?	Policies	
		Resources	
	How do you think the adult learner views learning with someone younger than they are?	Trade Off	
		Life Experiences	
	What are some challenges working with someone from another country who is learning from you to speak English and pursuing ‘The American Dream’?”	Surprise/shock	
		Trust	
	Misconceptions	“I think initially there is a surprise factor when the student realizes they may be working with someone who’s a lot younger than they are. In my case, the student is about my mother’s age, so I think she was surprised/shocked at first when she met me”	
	Unrealistic	“First, the idea of an ‘American Dream’ is full of misconceptions and unrealistic expectations.”	
	Adapt	“So you do have to learn, regardless of your age, – you have to adapt to the American culture, you have to get used being in a new situation, and a new life. So you re-identify yourself, you reevaluate what your identity is, and what it means to you.”	
	Identity		
	Personally Responsible		
	Resources		
	Successful	“[...] as a mentor, I feel personally responsible for providing the resources she needs to be successful in the United States”	

Carina described the lessons learned through this process, and shared that as a graduate student she was not sure if she could handle the workload and dedicate several hours per week mentoring an adult learner, but she refined her time management techniques, which, in turn, helped her with her coursework. She was also unsure how she would be able to connect with an adult learner from another country. As she refined her time management skills, Carina has been able to directly help her mentee and indirectly help her children by providing resources for relocating to the United States from Brazil. This gave Carina a sense of paying it forward and gave her more confidence in herself as a community leader. This information can be found in Table 3.

Table 3: Lesson Learned

Theme	Questions	Codes	Quotes
Lessons Learned	What lessons have you learned through this unique programming process?	Trust	“Program I was able to trust myself in taking on that time commitment and realizing that I could do a lot more than I thought I could because I had their support, so I had other people supporting my interests and telling me that yes, you can do this.”
		Support	
		Connect	“ I think that being able to connect with my student, I was able to realize that one semester wasn’t as much as I thought it was going to be and that it made me want to do more, because of that relationship I was building with that student. So, working with the Adult Literacy League made me realize that my impact was stronger than I thought it was going to be because you can see how connecting with that student changes their lives but it also changes yours.”
		Building Relationship	
		Impact	
		Change Lives	

When asked to make recommendations to her peers, nonprofits, and institutions of higher learning regarding this style of mentorship, Carina indicated that regardless of education, mentorship is important and that her peers should get involved. She emphasized that nonprofit organizations should partner with institutions of higher education to take advantage of these campus resources, “utilize college students as assets for fulfilling your mission, because they will help you reach your goals” (Carina, personal communication, February 29, 2016). This information can be found in Table 4.

Table 4: Recommendations

Theme	Questions	Codes	Quotes
Recommendations	Conference attendees may see this video and be interested in replicating your successes. What recommendations would you make for your peers, nonprofit organizations, and institutions of higher learning regarding this style of mentorship?	Important	“I think that mentorship is important regardless of what level of education you are talking about.”
		Level of Education	
		Campus Resources	“I would just emphasize that it is really important to take advantage of resources available on campus.”
		Long-Term Volunteering	“Long-term volunteering is very impactful, and it is really important and you may not think that you have time to do it, but once you start you will realize that you do have the time to dedicate to that project, whatever that project may be.”
		Impactful	
		Time	
		Assets	“Utilize college students as assets for that mission, for fulfilling your mission, because they will help you reach your goals.”
Mission			

Conclusion

The case study of utilizing the Adult Literacy League as a deeper, more intentional nonprofit partner with Volunteer UCF through the Community Connector program demonstrates a programmatic avenue where traditional college-age students *can* and *do* play an integral role mentoring adult learners while challenging traditional literature on mentoring adult learners.

The experience has established a successful synergy between VUCF Community Connectors and Adult Literacy League. The benefits to students from Adult Literacy League include greater exposure to its programs, services, and community events. It also provides valuable and relevant work experience to the Community Builder and assesses their volunteer programming.

Benefits to the partnering agency from the Community Connectors include utilizing time and talent from the community builder. In this case, Carina's experience as an ESL student who emigrated from her home country of Brazil allowed her to apply those experiences during her mentorship. Experiences like these make sustainable impact in the Central Florida community and give credence to academic experience being combined with the service component. Beginning with the *why* in the Golden Circle, this experience can be applied to other like-minded institutions of higher education who seek to implement a similar program. "It is one thing to study our community as academics, but we must also participate in serving our community as citizens and achieve participatory excellence" (Plante, 2015, p. 181).

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