

Activist Leadership and Learning Institute for Engaged Service (ALLIES)

by Angela Logan, Bonner Scholars Director

Purpose

- Offers integrated opportunities for students to develop and apply new leadership skills during a three-week training and application institute.
- Increases Bonner Scholars' understanding of the challenges community organizations face at different stages in their growth and development. Focus areas include the eco-social context of the region and leadership and communication skills.

Background

Since 2000, Oberlin has tried to reinvigorate student leadership at the Center for Service-learning (CSL). Previous attempts often lacked student input and support and were only marginally successful. Therefore, an effort was made to garner student feedback as A.L.L.I.E.S. was designed.

A.L.L.I.E.S., the acronym for the Activist Leadership and Learning Institute for Engaged Service, was a pilot initiative supported by a mini-grant from the Bonner Foundation. The first institute, held from August 12-30, 2002, consisted of training and application workshops led by Oberlin staff and community partners. The topics and skill areas addressed were critical to effective nonprofit leadership and were of great interest to students.

How It Works

Recruitment

Beginning in about mid-April, Bonner Scholars and America Reads tutors are given information and applications for the institute. Information is sent to the Dean of Students, the Multicultural Resource Center, Career Services, and students who were involved in previous CSL-sponsored service events. Four Bonner Scholars, three America Reads tutors, and a full-time AmeriCorps member took part in A.L.L.I.E.S. in 2002.

Logistics

A.L.L.I.E.S. begins three weeks before the academic year begins, so preparation and coordination with the Office of Residential Life and Dining is important. All participants receive room and board, and Bonner Scholars who participate in A.L.L.I.E.S receive 100 hours towards their overall Bonner summer service requirement.

Training Workshops

Participants take part in training workshops on leadership development and visit nonprofit community sites. The hosting organizations represent a range of focus interests, including youth, the environment, and gender and racial concerns. Nonprofit organizations at various stages of development are visited to increase the Scholars' understanding of the challenges community organizations face as they develop and grow.

Weeks One and Two: Presentations

The first two weeks of A.L.L.I.E.S. feature presentations by College personnel and leaders of local nonprofit organizations. These organizations center around three main areas: the eco-social context of Lorain County, leadership skills, and communication skills. Within these areas, certain skills critical for

effective work with nonprofit organizations are presented.

Week Three: From Theory to Practice

Toward the end of the second week, participants begin to put their skills to immediate use. In 2002, A.L.L.I.E.S. participants helped facilitate a session on the eco-social context of Lorain County and assisted with a toxic tour of the county for participants in one of the College's pre-orientation program (POP) trips. They also helped implement and facilitate the new Bonner Scholars orientation. At the institute's culmination, students were site leaders during the day of service, a county-wide service plunge open to all first-year Oberlin students. These activities offered a capstone experience for the program and were a good transition from summer to the start of the new academic year.

Follow-up Meetings

A.L.L.I.E.S. participants continued to meet during the academic year, focusing on how to utilize skills acquired during the summer at their service sites. Participants also work on presentations about the institute for a regional or national service conference. It is hoped that 2002 participants will lead sessions during the proposed 2003 A.L.L.I.E.S.

What Makes The Project Unique

The institute is focused on the eco-social context of Lorain County, Ohio. The term refers to the societal and ecological context of a particular setting. Through A.L.L.I.E.S., the CSL hopes to help students develop a broader perception of the community in which they are serving, including the ecological health of the region as well as economic, social, and educational justice concerns.

Everything from the timing of the institute to workshops offered to meal selection and preparation had significant student input. This offers additional opportunities for community and skill-building.

Benefits

To students

A.L.L.I.E.S. offers integrated opportunities for students to develop and apply new leadership skills. During the institute, participants consult with staff at their community partner and the Center for Service and Learning to develop an action plan of activities that they will undertake and skills they will seek to develop over the coming academic year.

Bonnors continue to mature and develop new skills as service leaders and cultivate a better understanding of the local community and organizations in which they serve.

Students take part in continuing training sessions throughout the academic year. They submit monthly progress reports about their service work and reflection journals documenting their leadership growth and progression.

To administrators

A.L.L.I.E.S. creates a group of well-trained student leaders and activists who are aware of the needs and priorities of the community and able to share their knowledge and expertise with peers, thus freeing up administrators.

To community partners

A.L.L.I.E.S. creates a well-trained group of student leaders and activists who are more aware of the needs and priorities of the community than many of their peers. It also increases exposure to local service organizations.

Resources And Partners

Center for Service and Learning

- Formulated the concept of the institute, leads sessions, and encourages students to apply and participate.
- Provides space for meetings.

Local community partners

- Lead sessions, allow participants to tour their facilities, and offer suggestions and input for the overall design and makeup of the institute.

Bonner Foundation

- Provides monetary support through the local summer service initiative mini-grant, the Bonner enrichment grant, and the Bonner Scholars Program administrative fund.
- Provides access to the COOL civic engagement curriculum.

Common Ground—The Cindy Nord Center for Renewal

- In 2002, sessions, meals, and direct service activities were held here the second week.

Oberlin College

- Allows use of vehicles and residence hall rooms.

Overcoming Challenges

The chief challenge has been to narrow down the large number of suggested topics to present during the summer session. Because of the volume of suggested topics, it has been difficult to make selections. The issue has been resolved by asking participants to identify the skills they want to focus on.

Another challenge has been scheduling time to hold the monthly sessions. Participants are active in the community and on campus making it difficult to schedule a common meeting time.

Evidence of Success

In 2002, pre- and post-tests were administered to A.L.L.I.E.S. participants. Results are still being analyzed, but early evidence shows that students had increased skills and knowledge in the three measured indicator areas: ecological, social justice, educational.

How to Make it Grow

The pool of applicants and participants could be expanded by encouraging students to attend who are not currently affiliated with a CSL-sponsored/supported programs to attend.

More students might participate if there were an incentive for Bonner Scholars, such as academic credit.