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Dr. James is a sociologist with specialization in race, ethnicity, and gender. In addition to teaching, he has worked on several community engagement initiatives partnering with Chicago Public Schools and Village Leadership Academy to improve campus and community relations. Dr. James is committed to building educational and cultural spaces, to promote diversity, inclusion, and improved race relations.

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**FROM GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNS TO WORLD SCHOLARS:
EDUCATING LEADERS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE**

Introduction

How can we build young people into emerging leaders who create social change? How do we build bridges between universities and Chicago communities to inspire young people to use their skills to address real-world needs?

Education about social problems in our schools and universities has often been provided through the research found in scholarly books and articles. Although many students in our schools have a commitment to addressing social problems, there is often a large gap between the knowledge found in scholarly books and how to translate that knowledge into projects that will produce social change. For many students, their academic learning does not offer ways to envision a career that links their passion for change making and their future work trajectories.

To address these issues, a service-learning partnership was arranged between the UIC Sociology department's senior Capstone course and Village Leadership Academy (VLA). VLA is a K-8 school that utilizes a social justice teaching approach to engage students in uncovering the social, political, and economic systems impacting their lives and the lives of others. One way VLA does this is through their grassroots campaigns, which are service-learning projects that students design in order to reduce a social problem affecting their community, the nation, or the world. As part of this policy and social engagement project, UIC students spent two semesters working with VLA's teachers and students on their grassroots campaign projects. Examples of these campaigns include: a "No to Tasers" campaign around police accountability, a voter engagement campaign, creating a coloring book that addresses sexual violence, organizing and hosting a Community Allies Fair, and a campaign to raise money to build a well in a village in Ghana. This mutually beneficial partnership offered a way for UIC students to connect the issues they learned about in college to social justice campaigns developed and executed by students at VLA. Through this service-learning partnership, VLA and UIC students were learning how to apply their academic knowledge to meet everyday challenges.

Findings

- Programs that build bridges between youth and university students can empower young people to understand themselves as agents for social change. These programs also empower college students by providing them with job training and experience translating their scholarly knowledge into social change projects.
- The integration of learning experiences in spaces outside of the classroom to a college curriculum offers rewards in learning outcomes as well as in student satisfaction and career development.
- This program to build bridges between youth and university students resulted in the development of partnerships between UIC and VLA that has persisted beyond the duration of this program.

Recommendations

Our education system is built on a hierarchical division between teachers and students that often fails to engage students as socially responsible citizens. The privileging of testing as a metric of success and a general reduction in funding for education have resulted in a decrease in programs that foster youth voice, action, and community level change. This project demonstrates that education policymakers and academic administrators concerned with learning outcomes, career opportunities for students, and improving local communities should make education beyond the walls of academic institutions an integral part of a college curriculum.