



Sleep Out on the Quad: An Opportunity for Experiential Education and Servant Based Leadership

Kristen A. Johnson, Jessica Grazulis, & Joshua K. White, Aurora University

Abstract

One of the purposes of higher education is to promote citizenship and social justice. This article explores the way Aurora University is helping students to discover what matters through the impact of Sleep Out on the Quad, which is an event that uses multiple pedagogies to impact student learning of homelessness. It serves as a call to action for one of our nation's most important issues.

Keywords: *experiential education, servant leadership, student learning, simulation*

Introduction

In the United States, approximately one in every seven Americans lives in poverty. While statistically this percentage rate has remained fairly constant (11-15%) over the past 30 years, the actual number of American's living in poverty has increased 35% during this same time period.¹ As the number of people living in poverty in both the United States and abroad continues to rise, higher education has a moral imperative to educate students using multiple pedagogies about the issues surrounding poverty and homelessness. Best practices seek to transform students who will go into the world and serve others. This transformation often happens when students are engaged inside the classroom and also immersed in co-curricular experiences. Aurora University has been addressing issues of poverty through both academic and co-curricular programs by instilling a sense of social responsibility within students. One of their latest programmatic successes has been the *Sleep Out on the Quad*, which is developed, implemented, and evaluated by a group of undergraduate students in the Leadership Education and Development (L.E.A.D.) program.² Over the past three years, approximately 400 students, faculty, and staff have attended an evening of educational sessions related to poverty and homelessness culminating in an actual *Sleep Out on the Quad* during a frigid evening in order to simulate homelessness. The authors note that this brief simulation is not designed to be a comprehensive experience of what it is like to be

1. Charles Hokayem and Misty Heggeness, "Living in Near Poverty in the United States: 1966-2012," *United States Census Bureau*, Washington, D.C., accessed July 28, 2014, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2014pubs/p60-248.pdf>.

2. The L.E.A.D. program at Aurora University seeks to develop the leadership knowledge and skills of students. It combines principles from both Social Change and Servant Models of Leadership. <http://www.aurora.edu/student-life/activities/lead.html#axzz386waVfOi>.

homeless. Rather it seeks to plant the seed of social justice through experienced dissonance in order to make participants agents of change.³ The purpose of this paper will be to discuss the programmatic goals for *Sleep Out on the Quad* as well as highlight qualitative outcomes.

The Role of Colleges and Universities

One of the most important outcomes for students in higher education is the development of leadership skills,⁴ and these skills should exist for the purpose of serving others.⁵ However, “one of the greatest failings of the American education system...is that young people can graduate from a university without any understanding of poverty at home or abroad.”⁶ These sentiments gave rise to the development of the L.E.A.D. program at Aurora University and the subsequent development of *Sleep Out on the Quad*, which is an event designed to increase awareness of homelessness.

To begin with, the L.E.A.D. program was developed in 2007 by a university-wide task force in response to students seeking further leadership knowledge and skills in conjunction with their course-work. After much research and discussion, the task force combined principles from both the Social Change and Servant Models of Leadership to provide a framework for the L.E.A.D. program. The Social Change Model of Leadership was chosen because it of its focus on increasing self-knowledge to enhance leadership competence and results in an eventual positive social change in the community.⁷ Similarly, Servant Leadership also focuses the development of positive social change, but does so through the paradoxical power shift of serving before leading.⁸ Therefore, the two overarching goals of the L.E.A.D. program are the enhancement of student development related to the content areas of self-knowledge and leadership competence, and the facilitation of positive social change through community service. Students voluntarily register for the program, which originally started with two sequential tiers. Recently it has grown to be comprised of four tiers. Each tier is a year-long program consisting of mandatory workshops and engagement, and leadership in service-oriented programs.

Overall, the L.E.A.D. program’s purpose is to evoke a sense of social responsibility within students through experientially based leadership. These types of experiences would have likely been supported by John Dewey, who believed that learning is most useful when students are immersed in their studies and in their communities of learning and practices.⁹ In fact, he believed that learning needed to involve the whole person (intellectual, physical, and moral); as well as be rooted in inquiry, and have an innate sense of risk.¹⁰

Sleep Out on the Quad was developed by students in the third tier of the L.E.A.D. program entitled Enhancing Campus Leadership. The event is an overnight experience seeking to

3. Sam Marullo and Bob Edwards, “From Charity to Justice,” *The American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 5 (2000): 897.

4. Dennis C. Roberts, *Deeper Learning in Leadership: Helping College Students Find the Potential Within* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007).

5. Tony Baron, *The Art of Servant Leadership: Designing Your Organization for the Sake of Others* (Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark, 2010).

6. Nicholas D. Kristof and Sheryl WuDunn, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide* (New York: First Vintage Books, 2009), 88.

7. Roberts, *Deeper Learning in Leadership*, 57.

8. Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: a Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 21.

9. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1916).

10. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938).

promote awareness of poverty and homelessness, and is aligned with the ideologies of experiential education outlined by Dewey. Through individual, group, and community exploration and experiences during the evening, the student's personal development is often connected with a desire to serve which results in positive social changes on campus and in the community.

The evening begins with a series of educational workshops where students participate in a variety of different activities. These activities are designed by students in the L.E.A.D. program with some guidance from the Director of Student Leadership and feedback from university students who have been homeless. This past year, participants went through a checklist to see if they had the skill-sets necessary to live in poverty, an experiential money game where tough real-life decisions were simulated, and a presentation from a family who was living in a transition program at a local homeless shelter. Following the workshops, students adjourned to the quad to "sleep" during a cold and uncomfortable evening. A wake-up call was made at 5:00 a.m. and participants congregated for a group reflection. This was a somber and heart-felt discussion, and participants reflected on what they had learned, stereotypes that were broken, and what they plan to do to contribute to their communities in the future. Lastly, students organized a food and clothing drive in conjunction with this event, which benefited the local homeless shelter.

This program represents the deliberate and continuing paradigm shift in education, away from the more detached type of intellectual learning found in traditional classrooms towards learning that is informed by the needs of the students and their communities.¹¹ This continues to support the work of not only Dewey, but also of Kurt Hahn, considered by many to be the founder of adventure education which is an offshoot of experiential education. Hahn thought the purpose of school was to prepare the youth for active citizenship.¹² Students were to be evaluated on items such as their sense of justice, their ability to do what is right, their use of imagination, and their ability to organize.¹³

To this day, as the face of higher education continues to evolve, so must the way curriculum is delivered. The most effective student learning continues to often be the result of student engagement through experiences both in and outside the classroom.¹⁴ After all, education should serve to infuse people back into their own communities to be agents of social change.

The Role of Experiential Education

Sleep Out on the Quad is heavily focused on both behavioral and cognitive aspects of experiential education because they represent a powerful learning pedagogy. The actual sleep out takes the complexity of simulated homelessness and places the learning in the hands of the participants. This is because the sequence of traditional information assimilation is flipped as they begin the learning sequence with an action that leads to specific applications of learning instead of visa versa. The learning occurs because the students are in a situation where the result is unknown, they have a role in their knowledge acquisition (based on past experiences and belief systems), and there is a perceived risk.¹⁵

11. Roberts, *Deeper Learning in Leadership*.

12. Anthony Richards, "Kurt Hahn," in *Adventure Programming*, eds. John C. Priest and Simon Priest (State College, PA: Venture Publishing, 1999), 66.

13. Kurt Hahn, "Juvenile Irresponsibility," *Gordonstown Record* 22, no.2 (1956): 15-21.

14. Dewey, *Experience and Education*. See also Alexander Astin, "Involvement in Learning Revisited: Lessons We Have Learned," *Journal of College Student Development* 49 (1999): 587-598.

15. Simon Priest, "The Semantics of Adventure Programming," in *Adventure Education*, eds. John C. Miles and Simon Priest (State College, PA: Venture Publishing, 1991), 112-117.

During the *Sleep Out on the Quad* event, participants often grapple with their role as contributing community members after hearing stories from individuals who are homeless talk about their struggles for basic necessities, when they themselves often have enough. The participants also feel vulnerable sleeping outside in the cold, and herein lies the power. It is in the “not-knowing” and the “discomfort” that the participants often find themselves confronting their own physical and cognitive dissonance.

Often when challenging this dissonance, the students come face to face with their innate desire to change the less desirable situation to a more desirable one.¹⁶ This represents a budding paradigm shift as they are motivated to resolve the dissonance. Through their actions, the participants often find a deeper purpose and meaning in life. For example, this past year, students, faculty, and staff heard a recently divorced mother and her three children speak about their recent struggles with homelessness. This family was excited about their pending move into their own apartment; however, they were still missing some of the basics necessities, including a bed for one of the family members. The students, faculty, and staff were so moved by their story, that they did a “flash-fundraiser” and raised enough money in a week to purchase a bed for the family.

In addition, students have been motivated to serve in other ways following *Sleep Out on the Quad*. The local homeless shelter has experienced an increase in the number of volunteers, students have switched majors to be in a more intentionally service-oriented industry, and work has begun on a university level to ensure comprehensive services are made known to university students who are homeless. All of this supports the ideology of experiential learning as being an influential tool used to provoke positive change on both personal as well as community levels.

The Role of Servant Based Leadership

Sleep Out on the Quad also utilizes some of the basic tenants of Servant Leadership. Robert Greenleaf, a recent theorist of Servant Leadership, was concerned about the effect leadership had on the least privileged of society.¹⁷ He placed special emphasis on serving those with the greatest need. So it should come as no surprise that the students in the L.E.A.D. program chose to educate the university community about issues of poverty as well as serve the homeless and inspire others to do the same.

According to William B Turner’s “*The Learning of Love: A Journey Toward Servant Leadership*” (quoted in Keith, 2008), at the core of servant leadership is the belief that “there is a deep spiritual hunger...to find a place where people really care for one another, where we can find something to believe in and something and someone to trust. When these things are discovered together in a community, great things can happen.”¹⁸ For students, faculty, and staff, *Sleep Out on the Quad* seems to provide just that opportunity. It often ignites a visceral response in participants resulting in an increased desire to serve. For many, it helps to clarify values and signify personal epiphanies.¹⁹ To illustrate this point, a faculty member, who has a brother that is

16. Simon Priest and Michael A. Glass, *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming, 2nd ed.* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2005), 21.

17. Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership: A Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 27.

18. William Turner as cited in Kent M. Keith, *The Case for Servant Leadership* (Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2008), 28.

19. Tony Baron, *The Art of Servant Leadership: Designing Your Organization for the Sake of Others* (Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark, 2010).

homeless, participated for the first time this year. He was so moved by the end of the event, that he talked about needing to connect with his brother more often and is also encouraging all of his students to participate in the event this coming year.

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, the growing numbers of students willing to identify as having been homeless are volunteering to help with the *Sleep Out on the Quad*. They have shared their stories with fellow students and faculty members, and in doing so have continued their journey out of shame that often is associated with being marginalized by society. They have served the greater university community by bringing the issue of poverty close to home, and helping participants realize that this is not an issue that exists outside of their frame of reference.

Student Reflection Vignettes

The following are two stories from undergraduate students at Aurora University who participated in *Sleep Out on the Quad*. Both narratives serve to illustrate how this event has the potential to be a transformational experience that both motivates and heals. The first story is from Jessica, who decided on a different career path after participating in *Sleep Out on the Quad*. The second story is from Joshua who is homeless when he is not attending the university. He has found the educational sessions which he leads during *Sleep Out on the Quad* to be nothing short of therapeutic.

Jessica's Story

My name is Jessica Grazulis, and I am a recent graduate of Aurora University with a degree in Psychology. I participated in *Sleep Out on the Quad* as an undergraduate student and note that few events in my life have impacted me as much as *Sleep Out on the Quad*. In fact, I have written about this event in graduate school applications, in scholarship essays, and also in my internship requests. My hope is that through this article readers can begin to understand why this event was so transformative.

On a cold and late October evening, students assembled in front of the Wackerlin Center for Faith and Action at Aurora University waiting to see what was in store for the evening. I had read that *Sleep Out on the Quad* was an event to raise awareness of homelessness and had hoped that through my participation I would understand what a person who is homeless goes through on a daily basis. However, once the activities began, I realized their struggles were much more extensive than I had anticipated.

One of the activities involved listening to families from the local homeless shelter explain their experiences to the audience. As I sat listening to the accounts of a woman unable to buy her child new shoes for school and a man struggling to find food every day, I became overwhelmed with the desire to help. For the first time in my life, I felt in touch with my own humanity.

That night we slept outside. Some people slept in sleeping bags, some in cardboard boxes, and some with nothing but a willingness to subject themselves to the full experience of sleeping in the elements. Though I had brought my sleeping bag, I barely slept with the sting of the cold. When I awoke that morning and returned to my room, it was impossible to not be grateful for all that I had.

In all honesty, *Sleep Out on the Quad* did not help me understand what a person who is homeless goes through on a daily basis. In fact, it made me realize that I can have only a fraction of this understanding. What I do know is that I cannot imagine spending every night sleeping out

in the cold and all the while hiding from the police. As a college student from a comfortable socioeconomic background, it is easy to take the basic necessities of life for granted. It is not until meeting someone who does not have the basic human rights of a roof over their head, a warm bed to sleep in, or even a place to call home, that one can truly appreciate all that they are fortunate enough to have.

After participating in *Sleep Out on the Quad*, I decided to do something more active with my career path. This event, along with other subsequent volunteer experiences, inspired me to serve as an AmeriCorps VISTA and obtain my ultimate goal of working with Spanish-speaking Americans and at-risk youth through counseling and social work opportunities. This experience taught me that everyone has a story and a struggle, and that everyone also has the capacity to help and to give hope.

Joshua's Story

My name is Joshua Kyle White,²⁰ and I am a student in the School of Social Work at Aurora University. I think it is important to state that it was not an easy path for me to get into Aurora University. I struggled with homelessness for seven years before I was able to find a way to afford to go to school. My homelessness was the result of multiple events that occurred around the same time. It was the perfect storm of a strong-willed teenager, a mother who was pregnant immediately after going through a tumultuous divorce, and the fact that she jumped into another tenuous relationship before I could even blink.

Over my seven years of homelessness, the small acts of generosity extended by those who had nothing is what inspired me to become a social worker. During my first year at Aurora University, I heard about *Sleep Out on the Quad* and I was really unsure about it. I knew that a fellow student and friend, who had spent a large portion of her life in hotel rooms with her family, was speaking at the event. But rather than attend the event, I chose to stay away. I was afraid about getting emotional or having the event trigger memories of a time when I had no control over my life. I also thought that there was no way that one event could help people understand the feelings that go with having no bed to sleep in at night or being forced to steal food for dinner. So rather than reach out, I chose to close myself off.

Soon after that initial *Sleep Out on the Quad*, I began classes in the social work program. In one course in particular, my fellow classmates were making incorrect claims about poor people that stigmatized the homeless. One day during class, I broke down and told the class about my experience. I told them how I did not choose to be homeless and explained several reasons why someone who is poor or homeless may choose to spend money on a cell phone rather than on food. After all, the chances of getting a job that would provide the money necessary to purchase food without a cell phone were slim to none.

Somewhere in my mind, that simple personal revelation changed my outlook in an instant. My choice to shut the world out was similar to not having a phone. I could not expect to get my message across without first providing the mechanism for effective communication. After this, I sprang into action and shared my experiences with my classes throughout the remainder of the semester and I finished with a renewed sense of purpose.

I spent the summer thinking about how I could utilize my negative experience in a way that could benefit my fellow students. As summer passed, I thought back to my courageous friend who could stand in front of a crowd of people during *Sleep Out on the Quad* and tell her

20. Joshua Kyle White indicated that he would like his full name to be included in this article.

story, and I was determined to use her courage to inspire myself to speak out about my own personal experiences.

Coming to Aurora University has helped me tap into the side of me that I had tried so hard to forget and hide. Returning from my summer break I was determined to speak-out, help, and inspire people. I volunteered to run a workshop at the next *Sleep Out on the Quad*. Knowing that some of the students in the L.E.A.D. program were running a session that simulated some of the structural components of homelessness (i.e., lack of affordable housing, lack of a living minimum wage, lack of access to social services), I decided to lead a session about the skill-sets needed for people to successfully live in poverty. I was truly surprised to find out how little the average student knows about how to survive in poverty and was flooded with mixed emotions. At first I was upset, saddened, and slightly offended. It was at that moment that I realized the true extent of the knowledge gap my peers had, so I chose to let go and educate rather than stay mad. As the three separate rotating groups came through my session and I explained the skills needed to survive on the streets, I saw their reactions on their faces and I realized the impact I was making. I also made a personal discovery—after every group I spoke to, I began to feel better about whom I was.

After participating in the *Sleep Out on the Quad* event, I feel more confident speaking about my experiences and feel as if a large weight has been lifted off my shoulders. I did not realize until after I spoke about how much anger I carried with me. I would treat people who had more money, privilege, or nicer things than me with a certain prejudice. After the event, I stopped looking at myself as a victim and more as a survivor. I hope to participate in all future *Sleep Out on the Quad* events, and continue to help educate my fellow students. The *Sleep Out on the Quad* event completely changed my outlook on life, and I hope this event continues for a long time to come.

I am currently homeless again, because I chose to give up everything I had earned to go back to school, but I have found a new home on the campus of Aurora University. With the help and guidance from the amazing and dedicated staff at Aurora University, I have been able to achieve beyond what I ever imagined for myself. I have found teachers who inspire, students who encourage and support, and a campus that I always feel welcome to come back to. I hope that by writing this that someone, somewhere has a sense of renewed vigor to pursue something better, because if you want something bad enough there are people and programs who will help you .

Conclusion

When educators and students immerse themselves in co-curricular experiences such as *Sleep Out on the Quad*, it is evident that learning, healing, and hope can become transformational. The educational institutions that support events such as these know that they can captivate and maximize student learning. However, the realization of what Dewey termed as “miseducative”²¹ or a harmful experience is always present. With the understanding that “miseducative experiences” can derail programs such as *Sleep Out on the Quad*, the Director of Student Leadership goes through a multitude of potential adverse experiences that might arise and the L.E.A.D. students discuss how to best handle each situation. This has included what to do if fellow students make fun of or berate students participating in the experience (such as when they are “looking for food in the garbage” as a part of the on-campus scavenger hunt) or how to deal with the lighting of a

21. Dewey, *Experience and Education*.

firecracker at night (the sound resembles gunfire) when participants are trying to sleep. All these potential negative experiences, when reframed correctly, ironically contribute to the participant's deeper learning and empathy for the homeless.

Learning also occurs because the educational sessions challenge all the common stereotypes participants have developed about those who are homeless. This was evident when an educated and well-spoken working mother and her three equally well-spoken children spoke of their experience of homelessness, when a teenager talked about being thrown out of his home because he is gay, and when a middle-class businessman suffered a catastrophic medical emergency and could no longer afford his home due to mounting medical bills. All these stories shattered misconceptions.

Perhaps one of the reasons educational institutions are typically not as eager to offer these types of programs is the standardization of curriculum and fear of the "less controlled" aspect of experiential education. However, there is benefit to putting the popular standardized learning assessments aside. Educators must embrace the notion that different lessons are imbedded in the experience for all learners, depending on the life experiences each individual brings to the event. If educators are willing to let the experience teach and then have the courage to act in service to others, the ultimate goal of living with purpose becomes apparent.

Finally, there has been advocacy and progress for students experiencing homelessness, but still more needs to be done. *Sleep Out on the Quad* is just one of the many efforts being made across campuses to raise awareness of those who are homeless. One comprehensive free online publication is entitled "College Access and Success for Students Experiencing Homelessness: A Toolkit of Educators and Service Providers."²² It covers topics such as choosing a college, advanced placement tests and fee reductions, free applications for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and more. It is a solid starting point to begin the understanding of the needs of student experiencing homelessness. Overall, most campus communities need to do more. Experiences such as *Sleep Out on the Quad* should serve as a call to action for students, faculty, and staff to involve themselves in service for the greater good.

Bibliography

- Astin, Alexander. "Involvement in Learning Revisited: Lessons We have Learned." *Journal of College Student Development* 49 (1999): 587-598.
- Baron, Tony. *The Art of Servant Leadership: Designing Your Organization for the Sake of Others*. Tucson, AZ: Wheatmark, 2010.
- Dewey, John. *Democracy and Education*. New York: The Free Press, 1916.
- . *Experience and Education*. New York: Collier Books, 1938.
- Dukes, Christina. "College Access and Success for Students Experiencing Homelessness: A Toolkit for Educators and Service Providers." The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth, Greensboro, N.C., accessed July 29, 2014, <http://www.naehcy.org/educational-resources/he-toolkit>.
- Greenleaf, Robert K. *Servant Leadership: a Journey into the Nature of Legitimate Power and Greatness*. New York: Paulist Press, 1977.

22. Christina Dukes, "College Access and Success for Student Experiencing Homelessness: A Toolkit for Educators and Service Providers," *The National Association for the Education of Homeless Children and Youth*, accessed July 29, 2014, <http://www.naehcy.org/sites/default/files/dl/toolkit.pdf>.

- Hahn, Kurt. "Juvenile Irresponsibility." *Gordonstown Record* 22, no.2, (1956): 15-21.
- Hokayem, Charles and Misty Heggeness. "Living in Near Poverty in the United States: 1966-2012." United States Census Bureau, Washington D.C., accessed July 28, 2014, <https://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/>.
- Keith, Kent M. *A Case for Servant Leadership*. Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2008.
- Kristof, Nicholas D. and Sheryl WuDunn. *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*. New York, NY: First Vintage Books, 2009.
- Marullo, Sam. and Bob Edwards. "From Charity to Justice." *The American Behavioral Scientist* 43, no. 5 (February 2000): 895-912.
- Priest, Simon. "The Semantics of Adventure Education in Adventure Programming." In *Adventure Education*, edited by John C. Miles and Simon Priest, 112-117. State College, PA: Venture Publishing, 1990.
- Richards, Anthony. "Kurt Hahn in Adventure Programming." In *Adventure Education*, edited by John C. Miles and Simon Priest, State College, PA: Venture Publishing, 1999.
- Roberts, Dennis C. *Deeper Learning in Leadership: Helping College Students Find the Potential Within*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2007.
- Simon Priest and Michael A. Glass. *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming*, 2nd ed. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2005.
- Turner, William. In Kent M. Keith, *A Case for Servant Leadership*. Westfield, IN: Greenleaf Center for Servant Leadership, 2008.

Kristen A. Johnson is the Director of Student Leadership at Aurora University. She directs the Leadership Education And Development (L.E.A.D.) program which seeks to promote student leadership knowledge and skill development through social change projects. She can be reached at kjohnson@aurora.edu.

Jessica Grazulis earned an undergraduate degree in Psychology from Aurora University in 2013. She is currently working as a Youth Development Promise Fellow with AmeriCorps at Greater Fall River Re-Creation in Fall River, Massachusetts. She is working on a Master's Degree at Northeastern University in Global Studies and International Relations. She can be reached at jlgrazu@gmail.com.

Joshua White is in his fourth year of undergraduate studies at Aurora University. He is majoring in Social Work and Psychology with a minor in Servant Leadership. He hopes to continue his education and eventually receive a Ph.D. in Psychology. He can be reached at jwhite01@aurora.edu.