

Regional Student Network Provides Model for Empowering Food System Leaders



Timothy J. Nichols¹
South Dakota State University
Brookings, SD 57007

Denise Gamble²
Anoka Ramsey Community College
Cambridge, MN 55008

Abstract

Cohorts of students from three Midwestern land-grant universities participated in an innovative leadership development program consisting of five off-campus food system leadership symposia. Through hands-on experiences, tours, service learning, interaction with diverse food systems leaders, daily de-briefing sessions and guided conversations, students moved through reflection and action, exhibiting extraordinary outcomes as a result of their participation. This article summarizes the history, major components, qualitative and quantitative feedback, results and lessons learned from the program. Theory emerges from these data, and is synthesized with existing learning/leadership theories into a new model for the development of future leaders for the food system. Program outcomes and implications for college teachers of agriculture are discussed.

Introduction

Educators, government, community and industry leaders are calling for the development of leadership skills among graduates from America's colleges of agriculture. The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1997) argued that today's colleges must "address the academic and personal development of students in a holistic way" (p. viii). The report continues, stating today's climate of sweeping economic and social change requires university students to develop "life skills and values...critical thinking and communication abilities...multicultural and global perspectives...respect for individuals and their sources of individuality...civic and individual responsibility...self esteem, self confidence...a sense of one's own competence...leadership and the ability to work well with others." (p. 26). The biggest educational challenge facing land grant universities today, the commission suggests, is developing students' "character, conscience, citizenship, tolerance, civility, and individual and social responsibility" (p. 27). These skills may not be addressed in current traditional agricultural curricula.

Others (Heifetz, 1994; Putnam, 2000) have cited issues such as global warming, religious and ethnic conflicts, maldistribution of wealth and opportunity, the decline of citizen engagement, the shift to a knowledge-based society, and from a national to global economy as evidence of the need for "creative solutions that will require a new kind of leadership" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 1). The Secretary of Labor's Commission on the Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS, 1991) highlights the importance of students' abilities to master complex systems, and develop affective skills and personal qualities such as integrity and teamwork. Wilson and Morren (1990) discuss environmental, economic, social and ethical issues at play in contemporary agriculture, underscoring the importance of developing "systems perspectives" and communication, people and leadership capacities among contemporary baccalaureate graduates in the food and agricultural sciences. The manifestation of this need for leadership education among collegiate agriculture instructors was apparent at the 49th annual conference of the North American Colleges and Teachers of Agriculture (NACTA), where the theme was "Developing Leadership in a Changing World" (NACTA, 2003).

Project Overview

Concerns about the development of future food systems leaders were articulated in a series of visioning sessions, facilitated by the Visions for Change (VFC) program, in diverse communities in Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota. During these discussions, which were a part of W.K. Kellogg foundation's Food Systems Professions Education Initiative, stakeholders repeatedly stressed the need for land grant graduates to be prepared to face complex issues, have critical thinking skills, and a sense of responsibility to their communities. Students at participating institutions--University of Minnesota (UM), North Dakota State University (NDSU), and South Dakota State University (SDSU) suggested any new leadership development program should go beyond opportunities available through existing college organizations to include action-oriented learning and hands-on exposure to

¹Assistant Director of Academic Programs

²Director of Continuing Education and Customized Training

food systems diversity. In the project's formative stages one student commented: "...we know agriculture is diverse and that other cultures are out there, but really all we've seen is Germans and Norwegians, corn and beans, cattle and hogs."

In response to these needs, a sub-group of the VFC steering committee, including a retired university president, a tribal college faculty member, an undergraduate student, a college of agriculture academic programs staff person, and a community outreach specialist, conceptualized a regional student leadership development project. A draft framework was shared with students at each campus, where the program's simple design elements were affirmed, and the model launched. The result: the Regional Food Systems Student Leadership Development Network (the Network), was formed.

The Network began with four primary objectives:

- 1) To enhance students' exposure to and awareness of the diversity and complexity of the contemporary food system.
- 2) To enhance students' leadership skills.
- 3) To inspire students to make a positive difference in the future of the food system.
- 4) To build a network for future learning and support among participants.

The Network operated from 1997 through 2002. During this time, a total of 39 students completed the program in three separate one-year cohort experiences. Cohort 1 ran March 1998-March 1999; cohort 2 March 2000-March 2001, and cohort 3 March 2001-March 2002. Breaks between cohort experiences were used to obtain additional funding, recruit new student participants, revise and evaluate the program as needed.

Students were selected by program coordinators (past student participants were also involved in selection of cohorts 2 and 3) through a rigorous application and interview process with careful attention to achieve diversity (age, majors, gender, ethnicity, previous leadership experiences, temperament, etc.) of student participants across the three states. To ensure equal access for all students, regardless of financial status, the Network experience—which cost approximately \$3000 per student—was provided at no cost. While expensive on a per student basis, participants were selected who showed promise as food systems leaders. The project's aim was to initially achieve deep impacts on a relatively small number of students who, through their professions and broader engagement in society, would impact other students, their communities, and ultimately, the larger food system. Initial funding was provided through a mini-grant from VFC, and a supplemental grant from the W.K. Kellogg foundation. Funding for cohorts 2 and 3 came through a USDA Higher Education Challenge grant.

The Network was developed as a co-curricular, not-for-credit experience. However, the international

travel experience was offered as a special topics course, and some students wrote about the project as part of an independent study and/or honors research projects. The Network's home at UM was the VFC project office; at NDSU it was coordinated through the Dean's office of the College of Agriculture, and at SDSU, the Academic Programs office for the College of Agriculture and Biological Sciences. The three campus coordinators for the program had diverse previous experiences in teaching, advising, student services, college advancement, project management, community outreach and leadership development. More than 20 faculty from participating colleges lent their expertise to the Network by presenting workshops and contributing to panel discussions.

Each cohort participated in five symposia designed to provide exposure and learning around diverse perspectives on food, agriculture and leadership. A brief description of each symposium follows.

Food Systems Issues in Indian Country, the students' first experience with the Network, was held on an Indian reservation in North or South Dakota during April. Initial activities included ice-breakers and team-building exercises, an overview of expectations and an initial leadership survey. Programming included sessions such as American Indian history and culture, economic development, tribal nutrition, diabetes and health programs, story-telling with elders, conversations with community leaders and tribal college faculty, service learning at an elderly nutrition center, tours of tribal bison/range units, and commodity food distribution centers. Students participated in a Lakota inipi, or sweat-lodge ceremony, traditional feast and mini pow-wow. Leadership activities included completion and discussion of the Gregorc Styles Delineator (Gregorc, 1982).

The cohorts' second symposium, held in August, dealt with Production Agriculture and Rural America. Program highlights included briefings on rural demography, tours of value-added agriculture enterprises such as pasta plants and soybean processors, of a university branch experiment station, organic and conventional farms, and conversations with entrepreneurs, teachers, farmers/ranchers, migrant workers, and other civic leaders. Leadership activities included team building using DeBono's (1985) Six Thinking Hats.

Food Systems Issues in Urban America and at the Rural-Urban Interface were the focus of the third symposium held during October in Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota. Tours of multicultural farmer's markets, ethnic and organic grocery stores and distribution centers, inner-city community gardens, the Minneapolis Grain Exchange, corporate headquarters for Cargill and Land O' Lakes, and suburban community-supported agricultural enterprises were among symposium highlights. Students also engaged in discussion with experts around issues of globalization in agriculture, trade, and biotechnology.

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Cultural experiences included attending a cooking school, dining at ethnic restaurants, and attending a ballet. Listening skills were the primary focus of leadership development activities during this symposium.

Students traveled to Costa Rica or Mexico for International Food Systems Issues a 10 day trip in January that included farm and home stays, tours of markets, cultural and archaeological sites, nature preserves, botanical gardens, meetings with local agricultural college students and faculty, interaction with indigenous people, and the U.S. agricultural attaché. In Mexico, students met with a cooperative of local dairy farmers, and learned about food imports, exports and distribution on a tug-boat ride with the manager of Mexico's largest seaport in Tampico. In Costa Rica, students explored sustainable production practices through the innovative work of EARTH College (Escuela de Agricultura, de la Region Tropical Humeda) a private university that educates students from throughout Latin America and partners with local communities in economically and environmentally sound approaches to agriculture. Cohort 1 toured a large Dole pineapple plantation, while cohort 3 spent time on a small, cooperatively owned pineapple farm and processing facility. Students in cohort 2 harvested coffee with Nicaraguan migrant workers and toured coffee production and processing centers. Cohort 3 spent time on the BriBri Talamanca Reserve with indigenous farmers, artisans, community leaders and business people to learn about their concerns regarding food, water, agriculture, community, health and quality of life.

Summative Retreat. A two-day capstone retreat, held in late February, dubbed From Reflection to Action helped students “connect the dots” across symposia by literally connecting (with long spools of yarn) critical messages on food systems and leadership from each setting. The retreat was also a time for students to integrate and assimilate lessons learned during their year with the Network, develop personal mission statements, and make action plans for their paths as food systems leaders. It also provided closure to their Network experience. Each summative retreat concluded with an all-cohort alumni gathering which fostered further networking, learning, and celebration.

Between symposia, students met with participants from their home campuses, corresponded with others in the Network via email, completed reading and journaling assignments, and connected with carefully chosen industry mentors to further explore their own personal and professional development.

Program Components: A closer look

Critical thinking and engagement. Rather than simply a series of tours, symposia included in-depth processing of food systems issues associated with each locale. In Indian Country, students heard about

the tension between those who want to commercialize bison and those who want to restore its cultural and spiritual significance among tribal people. In rural America, students role-played multiple sides of the corporate vs. family hog farming debate, and participated in sometimes heated discussions between conventional and organic farmers. In the urban setting, students engaged a diverse panel of experts on the pros and cons of genetically modified organisms. Broader issues were also explored including racism, poverty, economic development, environmental stewardship, citizenship and democracy. In each case, issues were not presented as black/white, or right/wrong. Multiple perspectives were heard, and students were left to grapple together with the complexity and ambiguity of these issues, to re-examine some of their previously held assumptions, and to think critically about their new, more informed positions on food systems, leadership, and broader “life” issues.

Stretch. Each symposium forced students to stretch outside their comfort zones, opening them up for new kinds of learning and growth. For example, most students had never visited an Indian reservation (much less participated in a sweat lodge), or another country; many of the urban students had never been on a farm, and many rural students had never visited a major metropolitan area before their participation in the Network. Also pushing students' bounds of familiarity were physical challenges ranging from white water rafting to hiking through the rainforest, horse-back riding, and crossing a high rope bridge.

Emphasis on Diversity. Every effort was made to select diverse students for the Network and to plan a diverse set of learning experiences for them. Participants included female and male students, sophomores, juniors and seniors, representatives from several ethnic groups, a variety of majors, and varying levels and types of exposure to previous leadership development activities. Each cohort included up to five students from each campus.

This diversity of experiences and participants allowed each student to assume leadership and teaching roles during the symposia when they were on more familiar turf. For example, American Indian students in the Network could speak first-hand to their experiences growing up on the reservation during the symposia in Indian Country. One Native American student participant said: “...the thing I appreciated most about the trip was not that I learned so much, but that I was able to teach others about my culture and educate them about where I come from.”

Farm students added their perspectives in rural America, and urban students shed light on their issues, while also helping others feel more comfortable in the city. Students also applied their discipline-based knowledge to Network experiences. For example, nutrition majors enriched the tribal

diabetes and health discussions, agricultural economists probed issues of marketing, and agronomy majors were particularly attuned topics relating to cropping systems. Similarly, students who had a grasp of the fundamentals of Spanish were key resource people for the rest of the Network during visits to Mexico and Costa Rica. This sharing of expertise greatly enriched de-brief sessions and informal exchanges between students while traveling and after hours (a favorite mantra of the Network, first shared with cohort 1 by a tribal college faculty member was “school is always in session”). This attitude became pervasive; it kept the learning process alive throughout (and between) symposia and strengthened bonds of respect and friendship among participants.

Leadership Development. While self-discovery through workshops on leadership styles, behaviors, and listening skills were integral to symposia activities, the focus was less on practicing specific leadership skills, and more on developing students' values and identities as emerging food systems leaders. Exposing students to a diversity of inspiring contemporary food systems professionals was key to this strategy. At each symposium, participants interacted with real people who, each in their own way, were working to make a difference in their communities. One student commented: “Whether it was sorting clothes in a homeless shelter or learning how vanilla beans are grown is irrelevant. What matters is that we were given the opportunity to practice leadership with other inspiring leaders.”

Another student said, “We met ordinary people doing extraordinary things.”

Leadership became the lens through which students viewed symposia activities. Students explored policy questions, food production and processing, environmental and human health, economic development and cultural restoration, not only from technical perspectives, but also, by thinking critically about the leadership issues involved. For example, when the Network interacted with a North Dakota ranch woman who had developed a remarkably successful micro-enterprise creating bird houses and home decorator items from farm products, the focus was not on technical aspects of drying flowers or entrepreneurship, but rather on the character and leadership qualities that led to her success.

Service. True to a servant leadership approach (Greenleaf, 2002), and to the previously cited calls for increased civic engagement and social responsibility, each cohort participated in structured service opportunities. These ranged from workshops with urban Native American youth, to preparing a meal at an inner-city soup kitchen, assisting with harvest at a community-supported farm, and collecting medical supplies for children who were victims of a rare skin disorder in Latin America. These service opportunities were rewarding for Network participants, and helped them connect with the communities they visited in meaningful ways.

The De-Brief. Nightly de-briefing sessions were another essential element of each symposia. Prompted with carefully crafted discussion questions and interactive activities, students shared, reflected, questioned, processed, synthesized and explored implications for what they had learned that day. These sessions, which often began late at night after a busy day of activities commonly extended for more than one hour. By engaging in and contributing to the de-briefs, students took active responsibility for their own learning. Program coordinators were consistently impressed with the depth and complexity of these reflections, and the extent to which students shared and questioned the thoughts, feelings, perspectives and reactions of themselves and their fellow participants. One student described the de-briefs as “some of the most dynamic conversations...I have ever been a part of.”

Results and Discussion

Students completed 1) pre- and 2) post-cohort experience leadership assessments, 3) formative evaluations of each symposia, 4) end-of- program assessments, and 5) follow up surveys all aimed at determining the nature of program impacts and the components of the Network that were most essential to students' development as food systems leaders. At the conclusion of the second cohort's experiences, an independent, in-depth case study was conducted by a SDSU Sociology professor. This evaluation included additional surveys, interviews and focus groups with students from the first two cohorts (Kayongo-Male, 2000).

Feedback from these evaluation tools was invaluable for the ongoing development of the Network. For example, the leadership assessment pre-tests were important in identifying students' perceptions of their own strengths and weaknesses and desired areas for growth. Program coordinators used this information to design activities and experiences targeted around these student needs. Formative assessment of individual symposia helped pin-point particularly effective (or less so) strategies which could be built upon for the group's next symposia, and for the experiences of ensuing cohorts. Qualitative narrative data from students' de-briefs, journals, papers, and post-experience interviews, shed light on broader issues relating to program design and outcomes. Finally, email responses to open-ended questionnaires one, two, and three years after participation provided evidence of the Network's lasting influences and most salient components. Evaluation highlights are discussed below.

One hundred percent of Network participants indicated that the program fulfilled its objectives, responding 'strongly agree' to each of the following items:

- 1) The Network enhanced my exposure to and awareness of the diversity and complexity of the contemporary food system;

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- 2) The Network enhanced my leadership skills;
- 3) The Network inspired me to make a positive difference in the future of the food system;
- 4) The Network helped me build my own network for future learning and support.

Table 1 highlights other areas of significant capacity building through the Network.

| Area of Competency | Students indicating significant learning (%) | Sample Qualitative response <i>Italics indicate direct quote from student evaluation</i> |
|--|--|---|
| Appreciation for different cultural groups | 100 | <i>I grew up next to a reservation, but (before this symposium) I never really understood all the issues facing Native Americans, or all the cool people working so hard to make a difference.</i> |
| Ability to work with others to create a shared vision | 100 | <i>We are a diverse cross-section of leaders, but we share in one accord.</i> |
| Understanding relevance of global issues to local agriculture | 95 | <i>I would have never realized that my preference for a yellow banana might actually drive a family farmer in Costa Rica off his land...</i> |
| Communications skills | 95 | <i>Now I know I am a better listener, and more confident in expressing my own views, too.</i> |
| Conflict resolution | 90 | <i>...I found that I was oftentimes outnumbered and outvoted in the discussions our group had, but these discussions were amazing...we had such a wide array of viewpoints and backgrounds represented. These conversations helped me solidify my personal beliefs while also proving to me that there are no one-sided issues.</i> |
| Understanding of my own leadership style and how to use it effectively | 95 | <i>I finally understand myself better: what my strengths and weaknesses are...and how to work more effectively with others.</i> |
| Understanding diverse food systems | 95 | <i>Here in SD when the word 'crop' is mentioned, we automatically think of vast fields overflowing...but there, 'crop' means hiking through two miles of rainforest to inspect banana plants</i> |

Student Empowerment. The Network was designed, implemented, evaluated, and determined to have met its objectives. On closer examination of the qualitative data, however, and through ongoing conversations with participants, deeper impacts emerged. Students did not describe their experience with the Network as “good” or even “excellent.” More typical were descriptors such as “awesome” and “fantastic.” Sessions weren’t characterized as “interesting” or “educational”, but rather “mind-blowing,” “powerful,” “inspirational,” and “the most beneficial educational program I’ve ever been a part of.”

Three years after her participation in the program, one student described her experience:

“The program has definitely had a lasting impact on me...it helped me figure out who I am and what I want to be, more than anything else...it helped me to learn how related everything is throughout the food system and the world...I’m continuing to learn about leadership, food and life through the lasting friendships that were made in the program.”

Clearly, something more was happening in the Network. Participants were being empowered.

Brazilian adult educator, Paulo Freire (1970) explains that empowerment emerges when individuals come to understand their own social reality and deal critically with it. According to Freire, when one participates in this sort of educational experience, he or she comes to a new awareness of self, a new sense of dignity and empowerment. Freire argues that empowerment includes genuine dialogue and must

be built around love, humility and faith. The process begins with listening, moves to engagement on issues, and ends with action for positive change. Tierney (1993) and Hazen (1994) suggest empowerment begins with dialogs of support and understanding across differences that support a changing social reality. This educational process embraces an egalitarian student/teacher relationship; one in which the teacher and student become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.

The unique relationship between the Network's coordinators and student participants was integral to the program's success. Because of the vast array of issues, information and experiences that were a part of the Network, the coordinators were not positioned as “all-knowing” experts. Rather, coordinators were facilitators

and co-learners. Staff helped to create a safe, stimulating learning environment in part by admitting their own ignorance, biases, and genuine enthusiasm for the extraordinary learning opportunities that were a part of the symposia. Also empowering to students was the staff's responsiveness to their needs and interests. The most dramatic example of this came at the conclusion of cohort 1's first symposia, when students' suggested an international experience to complement the original framework of three domestic symposia. Staff earned new respect and affection when coordinators were able to announce at the group's next meeting that additional funding had been obtained to support an international symposia in Costa Rica. Students developed a strong sense that the Network was a truly unique learning opportunity being designed especially for them.

Throughout their respective cohort experiences, students took expanded responsibility for their own learning. For example, at the first symposia, all components were carefully guided by coordinators. By the time the international trip came, individual students were responsible for introducing speakers,

leading question/answer sessions, facilitating discussions, and coordinating creative, fun approaches to the nightly de-briefs. A student from cohort 2 put it this way: "...the Network coordinators turned the traditional education system on its head...they fostered our imagination and intellectual growth."

Student empowerment was also evidenced in the changes experienced by Network participants, including new majors or minors (e.g., one student added a minor in environmental science), openness to new experiences (e.g., one student did an internship on a reservation; another studied abroad in Australia), and re-shaping career goals (e.g., several students had new aspirations for community-based and/or international work), and life aspirations. One student commented: "I was able to take other courses and participate in other activities that I would not have considered without the Network." In her paper summarizing her experience with cohort 3, one student wrote: "...going from the reservation to the rainforest ...helped me come out of my hard shell and show everyone and myself what I am capable of."

Another described her experience in the network as "a turning point in my life."

The Network's empowering influence can also be seen in the accomplishments of its alumni. For example, one student is now a food safety officer for the United Nations World Food Program in Rome, Italy; another is an agricultural extension educator at a tribal college; one manages a suburban organic community-supported agriculture enterprise, another is educational program director for a commodity group and another is a bank president. Each credits their experience with the Network as a significant part of their personal and professional development.

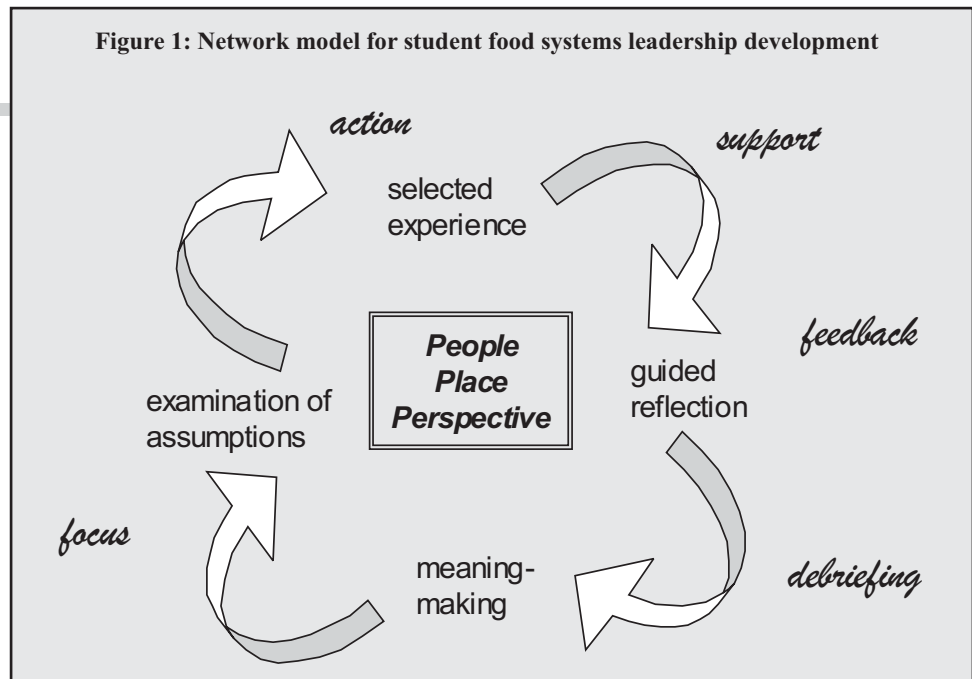
approach of the Association for Experiential Education (2002), students were engaged on multiple levels — mind, body and soul — and guided through a process of reflection, synthesis and analysis. Self discovery (Rogers, 1969) was integral to the Network's approach, as were elements of conversation theory (Pask, 1976), and situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991). The benefits of a heterogeneous group (Schwiedenwind & Davidson, 2000) were repeatedly evidenced throughout the experience.

The notions of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1962) and the disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 2000) were also reflected. For example, students were intentionally put into new and sometimes uncomfortable situations with others who would challenge their previously held opinions and assumptions on a variety of agricultural concerns; they were also exposed to multiple points of view and approaches to food systems leadership issues. During the urban symposia, students visited a dynamic inner-city community center located in a previously condemned high school and, a few hours later, the luxurious corporate headquarters of a multinational agribusiness firm. The next day, an agricultural graduate student from Ghana visited with students about how the policies of that same firm were impacting communities and the environment in his homeland. At the Indian Country symposia, students were led through an examination of their own stereotypes of Native Americans. An urban student described her experience at the rural symposia this way: "I came into this symposia pretty opposed to corporate farming. Then one of the students from South Dakota told us his family's ranch was a corporation. That made me look at things differently. I had to think it through and make it right in my head."

Theoretical Integration

The success of the Network generated coordinators' interest in discovering what theories could support and help explain the impacts experienced by participants. While innovative, the Network draws upon and synthesizes several well-established conceptual frameworks in education and leadership development.

Network participants were viewed as adult learners (Knowles, 1980), moving from dependence to self directedness, drawing upon previous experiences and eager to apply their new knowledge. True to the



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A new model. Coordinators derived an original model that describes what the Network does using a synthesis of educational and leadership development approaches.

The new model overlays the processes experiential learning — action, support, feedback, de-briefing, and focus (Joplin, 1995) and transformative learning —selected experience, guided reflection, meaning making, and examination of assumptions (Mezirow, 2000). At each symposia and collectively, students were guided through these processes. In the center of the new model lies the diversity, context and relationship dimensions of relational leadership (Komives, et al., 1998). Indeed, the diversity of people, places and perspectives lay at the heart of the Network experience. Whether on the reservation or in the rainforest, context mattered. Leadership was not a vague, abstract concept, but rather something that was being actively applied in a variety of contexts. Students were exposed first-hand to a diversity of real places, real issues, and real people, and thus were able to expand their awareness and glean critical lessons from each. The close bonds established between participants provided the strong relational support needed for students to feel comfortable, take risks, step out of their comfort zones and grow.

Two years after his participation in the Network, one student summarized his experience:

“The program has had a lasting impact by forging relationships with people I will forever treasure. I consider some of the participants...my closest friends and I will carry what I have learned from them always. They have inspired me to achieve and continue to remind me of how much people can accomplish.”

Implications and Conclusions

While intensive in terms of financial resources and person-power, both quantitative and qualitative evaluation results affirm the profound, lasting impacts of the Regional Food Systems Student Leadership Development Network. The Network may be looked upon as a model by other institutions seeking to develop comprehensive, cohort approaches to food systems awareness and student leadership development. While after funding expired in 2002, budgets did not allow the Network to continue in its original format, many of its salient theoretical and programmatic elements have been adapted in sum or in part to a variety of campus settings. For example, at SDSU, a new, for-credit general education course on Leadership for Families and the Food System has been developed around many of the principles and approaches (e.g. leadership inventories, diverse guest speakers, service learning) of the Network. A parallel course has been taught in the Honors program in UM's College of Agriculture, Food and Environmental Sciences. Similarly, college-sponsored international travel courses now include more extensive use of structured journaling and daily

de-briefing activities; methods strongly supported through experience with the Network. A new series of domestic diversity experiences for student organizations—including reservation visits and interactions with migrant and refugee communities—is also being implemented at SDSU.

Insights gained through work with the Network suggest several approaches for the improvement of college teaching in agriculture. In the classroom, instructors may seek ways to engage diverse students on project work teams. If diversity is less present in classes (which is sometimes the case in US colleges of agriculture) guest lectures, community-based service programs, travel and other not-for-credit experiences can also achieve meaningful outcomes. Letting go of 'expert status' and building time for student reflection through mechanisms such as journaling and de-briefing can be useful approaches.

Inviting dialog, and embracing the ambiguous, multi-faceted, sometimes controversial human dimensions of food systems leadership can be a daunting challenge for discipline trained faculty. However, experiences with the Network suggest the risk is worthwhile. Students respond to, appreciate, engage deeply and can be empowered through this transformative learning process.

Formal and informal agriculture leadership development programs such as 4-H, FFA, young farmers and industry-based programs have long been in existence. These efforts have made significant differences for participants and for the industry (W.K. Kellogg Foundation, 2000). As agriculture enters a new millennium, innovative approaches to leadership development are needed. By implementing a program during a dynamic, formative stage of students' intellectual and professional development, and by combining sound theoretical elements with a diversity of hands-on, real-world experiences, the Network provided a meaningful educational experience for this new generation of food system leaders.

Previous researchers (Daloz, et. al., 1996) found the only common experience among 100 socially responsible people was having “at least one significant experience...during their formative years when they developed a strong attachment with someone previously viewed as 'other' than themselves” (p. 110). This “constructive engagement with otherness” (p. 110), was, perhaps, the most lasting impact of the Network — creating understanding and connection across differences. Through the Network's transformative approach, “between the reservation and the rainforest,” students built capacities, relationships and commitments that have and will continue to empower them to make a positive difference for themselves, and for the future of the food system.

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