



# Catalysts of Social Change

## *Examining Leadership Development in Service-Learning*

**Genejane M. Adarlo**

*School of Science and Engineering, Ateneo de Manila University*

**Urduja C. Amor**

*School of Science and Engineering, Ateneo de Manila University*

**Agnes D. Garciano**

*School of Science and Engineering, Ateneo de Manila University*

**Juliet Q. Dalagan**

*Higher Education, Xavier University*

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### *Examining Leadership Development in Service-Learning*

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#### **Abstract**

The world direly needs leaders as agents of change in a society characterized by disparities in the quality of life due to unequal access to resources. A pedagogical practice increasingly used in higher education for students to acquire leadership skills is service-learning. However, few studies have examined the long-lasting effects of service-learning on student leadership development. Hence, this case study explores the enduring influence of service-learning on leadership development among 13 graduates engaged in a public health care setting in the Philippines as part of their coursework in 2014. Informed by the Social Change Model of Leadership Development, thematic analysis of focus group discussions revealed transformative leadership as the enduring influence of service-learning. Opportunities in service-learning for meaning-making seemed contributory for graduates to commit themselves as agents of change in society through their chosen profession. These findings support the view that service-learning is a high-impact pedagogical practice for teaching transformative leadership.

**Keywords:** *social transformation, transformative leadership, Social Change Model of Leadership Development, service-learning, higher education*

## Catalizadores del cambio social

### *Un análisis del desarrollo de liderazgo en el aprendizaje-servicio*

Genejane M. Adarlo, Urduja C. Amor,  
Agnes D. Garciano, and Juliet Q. Dalagan

#### **Resumen**

El mundo necesita líderes quienes son agentes del cambio dentro de una sociedad caracterizada por disparidades en la calidad de la vida debido al acceso desigual a recursos. Una práctica pedagógica usada cada vez más en la educación superior para que los estudiantes adquieran la habilidad de ser un líder es el aprendizaje-servicio. De todos modos, pocos estudios han examinado los efectos de larga duración de aprendizaje-servicio en el contexto del desarrollo del liderazgo estudiantil. Por tanto, este estudio de caso explora la influencia duradera del aprendizaje-servicio con respecto al desarrollo del liderazgo entre 13 graduados involucrados en un ambiente de un proveedor de servicios médicos públicos en las Filipinas como parte de su plan de estudios en 2014. Influenciado por el Modelo del Cambio Social de Desarrollo de Liderazgo, un análisis temático de las discusiones en grupos focales reveló que el liderazgo transformativo es una influencia duradera del aprendizaje-servicio. Las oportunidades del aprendizaje-servicio para tener un impacto parecían contribuyentes para que los graduados se comprometiesen como agentes de cambio social a través de su profesión elegida. Estas conclusiones apoyan la perspectiva que el aprendizaje-servicio es una práctica pedagógica de alto impacto para enseñar el liderazgo transformativo.

**Palabras clave:** *la transformación social, el liderazgo transformativo, el modelo del cambio social del liderazgo, aprendizaje-servicio, la educación superior*

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**Karla Díaz Freire**

Instituto de Aprendizaje y Servicio, Universidad San Francisco de Quito

Progress and development often result in a better quality of life, but their benefits can be unevenly distributed (Weinstein, 2010). Disparities in quality of life exist between and within the Global North and Global South because of changes that have accompanied globalization. These changes, including environmental degradation, social inequity, and technological divides, disproportionately affect marginalized communities (Stephens et al., 2008).

Addressing these challenges requires countermovement for social transformation, making leaders essential for positive changes in society (Bryson et al., 2021; Weinstein, 2010). Positive social change, as defined by Stephan et al. (2016), is “the process of transforming patterns of thought, behavior, social relationships, institutions, and social structure to generate beneficial outcomes for individuals, communities, organizations, society, and/or the environment” (p. 1252). Without transformative leadership, a more equitable and just society is unlikely (Astin & Astin, 2000).

Higher education institutions are uniquely situated in society as change agents because of their contributions to knowledge production and transfer, upward social mobility, and social reconstruction (Brennan, 2008; Stephens et al., 2008). Colleges and universities play a significant role in educating students on social justice by preparing them as leaders, who can be agents of positive social change (Astin & Astin, 2000).

Social justice education warrants the integration of leadership development into the curriculum, and many higher education institutions have responded by providing opportunities for students to acquire leadership skills (Stephenson, 2011). In the Philippines, the general education curriculum mandated by the Commission of Higher Education (2013) for undergraduate students “lays the groundwork” for preparing leaders, who can “anticipate and adapt to swiftly changing situations, ... think innovatively, and create solutions to problems” (pp. 3–4).

A pedagogical practice in higher education that can cultivate leadership abilities among students is service-learning (Lester, 2015; Seemiller, 2016; Wagner & Pigza, 2016). In this form of experiential learning, students learn to lead as they apply course content in response to the articulated needs of the community and reflect on their experiences of attending to real-world problems (Adarlo, 2017; Des Marais & Farzanehkia, 2000). Several studies have documented leadership development in service-learning (Chan et al., 2019; Chen et al., 2018; Huda et al., 2018).

However, most of these studies have only offered a snapshot of leadership as an outcome of service-learning using self-reported surveys at the start and end of student participation. Longitudinal studies are required to determine the long-lasting influence of this pedagogical practice on students’ leadership skills (Ma et al., 2018). Prior research also suggests that there are different perspectives on leadership (Bradenberger, 2013) and that there are varying practices and contexts in deploying service-learning (Kilgo et al., 2015). Qualitative inquiries are necessary not only to arrive at an understanding of leadership development in service-learning but also to consider multiple realities by valuing the study participants’ voices (Steinberg et al., 2013).

The following research questions (RQ) guided this qualitative inquiry:

RQ1: What kind of leadership can service-learning bring about?

RQ2: How does service-learning affect leadership development?

This study explored the enduring influence of service-learning on leadership development among graduates by following them up 6 years after their engagement in a public health care setting as part of their coursework during their last year of college. It examined how their service-learning experiences shaped their roles as change agents in society, using the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996) as a theoretical framework.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Social Change Model of Leadership Development is the foundational framework employed in many service-learning programs (Jacoby, 2013). Developed by HERI (1996), the Social Change Model uses community engagement as a vehicle for students to acquire the leadership abilities necessary to create a

lasting impact on society (Wagner, 2009). It challenges conventional notions of leadership by being inclusive, process oriented, collaborative, and transformative (Komives & Wagner, 2009). The model draws upon several theories of leadership and social change that have collectively influenced its philosophy of effective leadership. HERI (1996) identifies seven core values (i.e., consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, common purpose, civility, and citizenship) and three dimensions of effective leadership (i.e., individual, group, community/society) that are applicable and relevant in various social and cultural settings.

## Underpinnings

The Social Change Model offers a comprehensive approach to how students can lead social change (Cilente, 2009). Theories, such as Servant Leadership, Transformational Leadership, and Critical Theory, have shaped the model's understanding of how to equip students as leaders, who can make a lasting difference in others and the world at large.

Servant Leadership by Greenleaf (1977) views leadership as a selfless service that benefits others and the community. One of its key premises is that leaders can empower others and promote a stronger sense of community by serving them and creating a nurturing environment. This philosophy has guided the Social Change Model regarding the importance of shared leadership in seeking the collective good. Whereas the Social Change Model is relevant in educational contexts, Servant Leadership is more applicable in organizational settings (Greenleaf, 1977; HERI, 1996).

Transformational Leadership by Burns (1978) and Bass (1985) involves inspiring meaningful transformations within organizations. Its notions of shared vision, empowerment, and value-based decision making have influenced the Social Change Model's approach to leadership. Compared with the Social Change Model's focus on collaborative leadership in fostering social change, Transformational Leadership is concerned with individual growth within organizations (Burns, 1978; HERI, 1996).

Finally, Critical Theory, based on the works of Horkheimer (1972), Marcuse (1972), and Adorno (1998), has informed the Social Change Model's concept of leadership that seeks equity and social justice. This theory provides a lens for leaders to examine and challenge systemic issues that perpetuate social injustices. In contrast to the Social Change Model's practical approach to leadership development, Critical Theory is a broader framework used to deconstruct the existing systems of power and oppression (HERI, 1996).

## Seven Cs

The seven Cs in the Social Change Model include interrelated values that are crucial for effective leadership. These are categorized into individual (i.e., consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment), group (i.e., collaboration, common purpose, and civility), and community/society values (i.e., citizenship).

### *Individual Values*

Consciousness of self, characterized by an awareness of one's beliefs, values, emotions, strengths, and limitations, is essential in leading effectively toward social transformation (Fincher, 2009). Self-awareness, which includes mindfulness, helps leaders create positive environments, respond effectively to challenges, and arrive at decisions that are in the best interests of all (Urrila, 2022). Leaders with a high degree of self-awareness tend to lead with integrity and authenticity, qualities that not only foster trust and respect from others but also inspire them to engage in change efforts (Avolio et al., 2009).

Congruence, which refers to the consistency between one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, is also a vital aspect of effective leadership. It involves being authentic by aligning one's actions with one's personal values. Leaders, who exhibit congruence, can think rationally and clearly as they are guided by their principles rather than by emotions or biases. They are more likely to gain the support of others in

bringing about positive changes in society because they are viewed as trustworthy and credible for leading by example and living out their values and beliefs (HERI, 1996; Shalka, 2009).

Commitment, or the resolution to see tasks through completion, is another defining characteristic of effective leadership. It motivates leaders to translate their principles into tangible actions and enables them to persevere in the face of challenges. By understanding that social change requires sustained effort, committed leaders are not easily discouraged from seeking solutions to societal problems (HERI, 1996; Kerkhoff & Ostick, 2009). They set a good example by investing time, effort, and resources to improve their community and society even in difficult circumstances (Abrell-Vogel & Rowold, 2014).

### *Group Values*

Collaboration, which involves bringing together diverse talent, skills, experiences, and perspectives to reach a common goal, allows leaders to achieve more than they can individually (Astin & Astin, 2000). This process necessitates building relationships and working with others to find innovative solutions that benefit many (HERI, 1996). A shared vision provides direction and clarity for collaborative efforts, whereas shared responsibility ensures that all can meaningfully contribute to social change (England, 2009; Lawrence, 2017).

Common purpose, on the other hand, unites people with diverse backgrounds, interests, and strengths through the shared vision of an equitable and just society. Without a unifying goal that binds individuals and groups together, collective actions would lack direction, coherence, and meaningful impact. This unifying goal helps bridge differences among individuals and moderates conflicting viewpoints within a group by ensuring that decisions and actions are aimed at achieving the desired outcome (Cilente, 2009; HERI, 1996; Teh, 2009).

Civility creates a space in which opposing views can coexist harmoniously through respectful dialogue, recognizing that multiple perspectives can enrich discussions on arriving at innovative solutions to societal problems (Alvarez, 2009). Leaders practicing civility foster a safe environment in which everyone feels comfortable sharing ideas, even if they differ. They make everyone feel valued not only by being open to different perspectives but also by demonstrating a willingness to consider their ideas thoughtfully (HERI, 1996; Porath et al., 2015).

### *Community/Society Value*

Citizenship, which involves assuming the roles and responsibilities inherent in being part of a community, situates leadership as part of a larger purpose. Rather than seeking personal success, leaders display an ongoing commitment to make positive and meaningful contributions to the betterment of society. They not only recognize that collective action is necessary for far-reaching implications in society but also understand that their change efforts must align with the needs of the community (Bonnet, 2009; Cilente, 2009).

Studies have shown that engaging with communities, such as through service-learning, provides leaders with opportunities to reflect on their beliefs and principles as they are exposed to diverse perspectives and experiences that challenge their existing assumptions. This self-reflection not only allows leaders to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their roles in society but also informs their approach to leadership by fostering a greater sense of responsibility and commitment to serving the common good (Buschlen & Dvorak, 2011; Dixon et al., 2019).

## **Applicability and Relevance**

Cultural, social, and educational contexts can influence leadership development and practices as societies have varying norms, expectations, and values. For example, collectivist cultures favor leadership based on collaboration and harmony, whereas individualistic cultures place importance on autonomy and personal achievements. Leadership in high-power distance cultures is hierarchical, whereas that in low-power distance cultures is more inclusive. Social networks and role models can provide emerging leaders with

opportunities for guidance and support, whereas an educational environment with a strong emphasis on leadership development and community service can encourage students to become more active, engaged, and socially responsible leaders (House et al., 2004).

Although the Social Change Model originated in the United States, its core constructs of leadership are considered universally desirable attributes (Dugan et al., 2011). Numerous studies support the sociocultural applicability and relevance of this model (Dugan, 2015; Dugan et al., 2009, 2011). However, there are nuances regarding the expression of these leadership attributes (Dugan et al., 2009). For instance, collegiate experiences, including sociocultural conversations with peers, faculty mentoring, and participation in community service, can contribute to students' leadership capacities (Dugan & Komives, 2010). Despite these nuances, the Social Change Model resonates with the common ideals of effective leadership. Its emphasis on leadership rooted in shared aspirations for an equitable and just society makes this model applicable and relevant across various sociocultural contexts and settings (Dugan, 2015; Dugan et al., 2009, 2011).

## Methodology

This qualitative research employed a case study design to explore leadership development in service-learning. The case study design was chosen because of its suitability for providing an in-depth and nuanced understanding of social phenomena, particularly in real-life settings. It can also offer rich insights into complex phenomena that may not be fully captured by other research designs (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018).

### Setting and Participants

The Summer Immersion-Praxis Program, instituted in 2013, constitutes one of the service-learning initiatives of Ateneo de Manila University, an institution of Jesuit higher education in the capital of the Philippines. This voluntary program prepares undergraduate students in a health-related field as professionals, who can make a difference in society. Specifically, it offers opportunities for students in their final year of study to be immersed in a rural health care setting, where they apply their learning to address the health care needs of a local community. This community engagement builds upon previous service-learning experiences of students in their curriculum, exposing them further to real-world situations as “dynamic leaders” and “decisive social catalysts” (Ateneo de Manila University, 2020, p. 396).

This case study examined the Summer Immersion-Praxis Program that took place from April to May 2014, whereby 4 weeks were allotted for classroom instruction, whereas 10 days were spent on community engagement in the Leyte Province of the Philippines. This service-learning necessitated students to apply concepts from their classes in The Health Professional as Administrator about the six building blocks of health systems, social determinants of health, and human-centered design in assessing the impact of Typhoon Haiyan on health care access and delivery in Leyte. It also entailed students connecting the principles of Catholic social teaching from their classes in A Theology of Catholic Social Vision to address disparities in health and to show solidarity with the Leyte community in strengthening their health system as part of their postdisaster rehabilitation and recovery efforts.

Several criteria were used to select participants for this study. First, they should be among the 24 students in the 2014 Summer Immersion-Praxis Program to ensure that they have common experiences in service-learning. Second, these participants must have completed their undergraduate degree in 2015 so that they are at similar stages in their lives. Finally, they should be willing to participate in a follow-up so that the far-reaching implications of service-learning on leadership development can be examined.

Facebook's social networking service was used to recruit participants. It was the most suitable for reaching the 2014 cohort of the Summer Immersion-Praxis Program because they maintained a group page to facilitate communication among themselves and with the faculty supervising them during this service-learning. Two researchers in this study were part of this faculty and thereby had direct access to eligible participants. However, relying on Facebook for participant recruitment could introduce a selection

bias, as those who are more active on social media can be overrepresented, whereas those who are less engaged can be underrepresented.

Thirteen participants were included in this study. They were 24–26 years of age at the time of data collection. Four of them were male, and nine were female. They belonged to the middle and upper socioeconomic classes. Nearly all were due to taking the physician licensure examination when they joined this study, whereas only one pursued a career in public health research.

## **Data Gathering**

Ethics clearance was obtained from an institutional review board before this study commenced. To gather a wide range of perspectives on their shared experience in service-learning, the study participants were requested to take part in an online focus group discussion through Google Meet. Two focus groups were formed based on availability, with one consisting of five study participants and the other of eight. The size of these focus groups is ideal for managing discussions among participants regarding their shared experiences (Krueger & Casey, 2015).

A focus group discussion was practical for this study because it can collect data from multiple participants in a single session, where individual viewpoints and collective understanding can be gathered. It can also offer insights into social meanings based on group conversations and interactions. For example, the dynamic exchange of ideas among participants can lead to a deeper reflection on their experiences by uncovering insights that may have remained unexplored (Abrams & Gaiser, 2017).

Online was the most viable medium for data collection, given the COVID-19 restrictions. Aside from ensuring the safety of both the researchers and participants, this medium allowed the inclusion of eligible participants with geographical constraints. Studies have shown that online focus group discussions can yield data similar in quality to in-person discussions, with videoconferencing applications capturing nuances in facial expression and speech (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018; Woodyatt et al., 2016).

Questions during the focus group discussions explored participants' involvement in the Summer Immersion-Praxis Program, any opportunities to lead, the influence of service-learning on their leadership capacity, their engagement in addressing social issues, and the relevance of their careers in improving society. When needed, additional questions were asked for clarification. Each focus group discussion lasted for 120–150 minutes. Video recordings of these focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim.

## **Data Analysis**

Thematic analysis was performed using Taguette, a software that allows researchers to collaborate in analyzing textual data. Each transcript was read and reread in its entirety for familiarization, whereas the initial observations were noted as memos as part of the immersion with the data. Extracts from transcripts were assigned initial codes. A priori codes from the Social Change Model provided a structure for analyzing the transcripts, whereas in vivo codes based on the study participants' language accounted for the unanticipated. Similar or related codes were categorized into themes. Afterward, candidate themes were reviewed against the extracts from the transcripts to ensure that they cohere meaningfully. Finally, themes showing a semblance of patterns were further grouped to arrive at a central theme (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The first researcher led the thematic analysis, whereas the other researchers checked the emerging themes for agreement and discrepancy. This process of data triangulation ensures rigor in the data analysis by minimizing individual biases and considering diverse viewpoints. In reporting the findings, quotes from the focus group discussions were deidentified, and pseudonyms were used to ensure the privacy of the study participants.

## **Trustworthiness**

Several steps were taken to ensure the reliability of the findings. First, the research process is described to provide an audit trail. Second, a copy of the transcript was sent to the study participants to verify its

correctness. Third, the identified themes were substantiated using extracts from the transcripts. Fourth, reflexivity was exercised by acknowledging how social background and long-held assumptions may influence research practice. Finally, peer debriefing was conducted by discussing the coding process to garner feedback and conceptual clarity from colleagues (Peel, 2020).

## **Findings**

A thematic analysis of the focus group discussions revealed transformative leadership as an enduring influence of service-learning among the study participants. It also showed that meaning-making in service-learning contributed to their leadership development and inspired them to be catalysts of change in society.

### **Transformative Leadership**

Several attributes characterize transformative leadership in service-learning. These include self-awareness, authenticity, commitment to action, relationship building, shared vision, respect for others, and a sense of social responsibility.

#### *Self-Awareness*

When asked how their service-learning in a public health care setting influenced them personally, the study participants enumerated acquiring soft or life skills, such as problem-solving, active listening, effective communication, interpersonal skills, empathy, and strong work ethics. For instance, Aubrey and Hilary mentioned how their experiences taught them to “think out of the box” and consider various possibilities when addressing societal issues. Ivy also felt better prepared to engage with the community, whereas Juliet learned how to effectively communicate with “people on the ground.”

These skills, as Juliet realized, “can be applied to other aspects of [their] lives.” Agatha, for example, found that the interpersonal skills she gained during service-learning have become useful in establishing rapport with patients. Ivy also recognized that service-learning equipped her with a broader perspective, which has proven to be valuable in her role as a researcher.

Their community engagement in service-learning helped the study participants, including Caroline, develop a better understanding of themselves and their capacity to serve others. It allowed them to “set their priorities straight and broaden their perspectives about what is out there.” Engaging with the community also made Aubrey and others recognize that they can “use [their] privileges to serve those in need.”

#### *Authenticity*

Study participants, such as Juliet and Hilary, took part in this service-learning not because it was an academic requirement but out of a genuine desire to serve others. This desire, as Agatha mentioned, stems from their awareness that they “have the resources to help others.” Because of this awareness, Aubrey, Caroline, Juliet, and Russell felt a moral obligation to serve the less privileged.

This desire to help those in need greatly influences their career choices. Their experiences in service-learning further inspired Aubrey and others to contribute their talent and abilities to improve the state of public health in the country. Witnessing the challenges faced by communities during disasters, such as Typhoon Haiyan, deepened their conviction to act on these realities. Caroline, for instance, expressed her intention to volunteer as a physician in underserved communities as a part of upholding and living out her social responsibility.



### *Commitment to Action*

Their community engagement in service-learning, as Caroline recalled, reinforced their advocacy to “bridge the schism between clinicians and public health practitioners.” It made them more resolute to work together, particularly if an impactful solution was sought to address disparities in health.

Many of them, including Hilary, Kaye, and Jayla, came to realize during their service-learning that serving as physicians in public hospitals or remote areas is where they can have the greatest impact. This realization was influenced by their firsthand experience in service-learning regarding the gaps in the Philippine health care system, particularly the need for health care professionals in underserved communities. Their genuine desire to address these gaps has led them to consider careers in public health, a path that only a few choose but one where they feel their services are most needed.

Russell and the other study participants felt a strong sense of responsibility to address social issues because they recognized that “these issues might go unattended if [they] do not get involved.” They were aware of their privilege and believed that it could be harnessed to create lasting changes in society. Notably, their commitment to advocating for the underserved and their sense of responsibility toward society have continued to influence their actions.

### *Relationship Building*

Service-learning taught Hilary, Aubrey, Ralph, and others interpersonal and communication skills as they had to work in groups “in assessing the health care system of Leyte and in brainstorming if there is anything they can help improve.” Such “team effort,” as Juliet and Ralph observed, resulted in better coordination within and among groups in drafting their recommendations for the local government of Leyte regarding health care provision. Having to collaborate for this service-learning made Hershey recognize the value of rapport and challenged Kaye “to work with those [she is] not close to.”

Study participants, such as Juliet, found that the collaborative skills they acquired from their service-learning in Leyte have become particularly useful during their community engagement while in medical school. Specifically, their exposure to establishing rapport with persons in authority during their service-learning prepared them well on how to approach local officials in their assigned community in coming up with effective solutions to urgent health-related issues.

### *Shared Vision*

Their service-learning in a public health care setting showed Caroline and others that working together toward a common goal is possible. Despite their individual differences, Aubrey described how helpful their “town hall meetings” were in arriving at a common understanding or shared vision as they were “encouraged to give their inputs.” These town hall meetings provided spaces in which Ivy and the other study participants could openly share their insights, ideas, and perspectives to reach an inclusive consensus. Such a common understanding, as Agatha elaborated, can be credited to the “connections formed” and “friendships gained” during service-learning.

Juliet and others also realized through service-learning the importance of having a shared vision when engaging with the community. Given this realization, Caroline would encourage her peers, who are hesitant about community engagements, to have “a change of heart” and be part of “something bigger than themselves.” This change of heart would entail a shift in their perspective from viewing community engagement as an academic task to recognizing it as an opportunity for personal growth and positive change in society.

### *Respect for Others*

Aubrey and Juliet admitted that working as a group for this service-learning in a public health care setting can be quite challenging because each of them thinks differently. Ivy, however, found that “[these individual differences] really widened [her] perspective.” Agatha also appreciated how their service-learning allowed her to learn from the perspective of others. For Caroline, she learned to “provide

others the space and the respect to do what is right since [they] are working toward something together.” Service-learning also taught her the importance of humility as she acknowledged that “not all the time [she is] right and knowledgeable.”

Engaging with the community in Leyte was difficult for the study participants. Hilary and Hershey described the community as “resistant to change” and their suggestions to them appeared “not to fit to what they truly need.” Aubrey, Jayla, and others eventually realized that they must adapt and consider the community’s context. Study participants, such as Kaye, learned through this experience that the “first stage in community engagement is to always listen.” Other essentials of community engagement, as Agatha added, include accepting local norms and adjusting to the community’s way of life. Jayla also emphasized the importance of “phrasing their recommendations properly” to convey their intentions to the community well.

These realizations have greatly influenced how the study participants approached community engagement. Caroline, for instance, would apply the skills of effective communication, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to navigate diverse perspectives when interacting with health care workers in the community assigned to her in medical school. She recognized that respect for others is crucial for building trust and fostering meaningful relationships, as communities are more likely to engage when they feel valued and respected. Others, such as Hilary and Ivy, have gained confidence in their community engagement, as service-learning taught them the value of listening to the community, understanding their needs, and adapting to their context.

### *A Sense of Social Responsibility*

Service-learning influenced Juliet, Aubrey, and others to “be more proactive in community engagement” and “make a bigger difference in society.” Their exposure to real-world challenges and the opportunity to contribute to postdisaster rehabilitation and recovery efforts instilled in them a sense of agency and a desire to make a tangible impact. Furthermore, study participants, such as Hilary, gained confidence in getting involved in community service because the opportunity to address health-related issues in service-learning provided them with a stronger sense of purpose. Their experience in Leyte motivated Agatha to seek “additional avenues to contribute during medical school” and helped Caroline and others to better understand their role in society.

Caroline attributed this heightened sense of social responsibility to her realization while in service-learning that she “is not living in a bubble” and must therefore “contribute something that others in the community do not have.” In applying the human-centered design to identify and address health-related issues in Leyte, Aubrey and Jayla recognized “their moral obligation to share what they learned and help others” because “being privileged comes with a responsibility.” Manuel described this sense of social responsibility as part of *bayanihan*, a Filipino term for collective effort for the common good, whereas Russell illustrated it as “a display of preferential option for the poor.”

### **Meaning-Making**

Study participants, including Hilary, considered this “service-learning experience as something [they] would always look back on.” They found it very memorable because there were occasions to be exposed to and immersed in real-world situations, as well as instances for practical application and reflection.

Their community engagement in service-learning provided Manuel, Russell, Agatha, Jayla, and Kaye with a firsthand view of the real world and exposed them to the profound challenges faced by disaster-stricken communities. This experience led to numerous realizations about society, the health care system, and the need to address pressing issues. Consequently, Aubrey and Hershey found this exposure highly meaningful as not everyone has the experience to contribute to postdisaster rehabilitation and recovery efforts.

Furthermore, the 10 days of immersion in Leyte challenged Hilary, Agatha, Aubrey, and others to “step out of [their] comfort zone” because they needed to live in an unfamiliar environment and interact

with different people. In the process, they “got to understand the people [in Leyte] and their situations” and “question the inequality that [they] see on the ground.”

Study participants, including Caroline and Agatha, also found their orientation to Leyte, its health care system, and its residents helpful in facilitating their community engagement and ensuring that the community would truly benefit from their community service. This “briefing” from their teachers reflects a proactive effort to understand the community that they would be engaging with. This can be seen as a form of reciprocity, where they show respect for and acknowledge the community’s context before entering it.

Receiving guidance from their teachers throughout their service-learning also helped the study participants effectively engage with the community and make meaningful contributions. This support ensured that their community engagement addressed the articulated needs and aspirations of the community, fostering a sense of reciprocity from which both sides benefited. Given that they “were guided by their teachers along the way,” Issa considered it a “shame if [they] cannot do [their community engagement] right.”

Despite finding service-learning “not as structured as the classroom setting,” Russell, Caroline, and Agatha expressed that they learned a lot by “going through the experience itself” and “being hands-on in the community.” Juliet appreciated the opportunity to apply their learning in a practical context, whereas Ivy valued the “independence and freedom to make decisions about their activities and interactions.” For Ralph, this practical application of their learning was particularly satisfying as it prepared him for his future career in health care.

Their service-learning in a public health care setting, as Manuel revealed, contributed to their “self-discovery” because there were occasions for making sense of their experiences through theological reflection. Due to this, Kaye described their experiences in Leyte as “not an immersion without the theology part.” Making them undergo theological reflection, as Agatha added, “strengthened the reasons why [they] are pursuing a medical profession” and inspired them further “to respond to the greater call to serve the less privileged.”

## Discussion

Six years have passed since the study participants spent 10 days in Leyte for their service-learning in a public health care setting as part of the community’s postdisaster rehabilitation and recovery efforts. However, they still vividly recall how service-learning contributed to their development as transformative leaders and their understanding of their role as agents of change in society.

Transformative leadership, based on the Social Change Model, can be fostered in service-learning because there are opportunities to gain leadership capabilities that are deemed necessary to facilitate social change (Astin & Astin, 2000). In this study, transformative leadership as an enduring influence of service-learning involves self-awareness (consciousness of self), authenticity (congruence), commitment to action (commitment), relationship building (collaboration), shared vision (common purpose), respect for others (civility), and a sense of social responsibility (citizenship). These descriptions of transformative leadership closely resemble those of Shea (2018), who employed the Social Change Model to examine, among interviewed graduates, the kind of leadership that developed from their participation in service-learning while in college. These findings also offer further insights into the survey results of Dugan (2006) and Simons et al. (2020), who measured leadership capabilities among undergraduate students involved in service-learning using the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale, an instrument based on the Social Change Model.

Service-learning, as Wurr and Hamilton (2012) observed, can help students clarify their purpose in life by allowing them to be part of something larger and contribute to the common good in their own way. However, the likely influence of service-learning in this regard is less clear, as previous studies have only documented gains in leadership capabilities and have often excluded what makes this community engagement bring about transformative leadership among students. Therefore, this study explored the

specific aspects of service-learning that influence students to commit themselves as catalysts of change in society.

Based on the narrations of the study participants, this qualitative inquiry substantiates Wagner and Pigza's (2016) view of leadership as a process of shared meaning-making. In service-learning, meaning-making is made possible when elements of reality, reciprocity, and reflection are present (Chen et al., 2018).

Leadership development entails learning skills and habits of being, which can best be taught through experiential learning, including service-learning (Wagner & Pigza, 2016). Specifically, the world becomes a "classroom under construction," where students learn to lead as they engage in real-world situations (Des Marais & Farzanehkia, 2000, p. 680). Community engagement in service-learning situates students in real-world settings where they can contribute to the common good (Chen et al., 2018). Service-learning not only affords them the democratic space to be involved in social issues but also makes them take ownership and be responsible in a real-world context (Wurr & Hamilton, 2012). In this study, service-learning not only exposed the study participants to the realities of the Philippine health care system but also challenged them to apply their learning to address social issues.

Reciprocity involves the community truly benefiting from service-learning as much as students do (Chen et al., 2018). This warrants occasions in service-learning that allow students to examine power relations (Wagner & Pigza, 2016). As shown in this study, being immersed in the daily lives of those in their service-learning community helped the study participants recognize the privilege they enjoyed. This acknowledgment is crucial for building authentic relationships with communities. Other crucial aspects include students being oriented to the context of the community and being guided by their teachers throughout community engagement. Otherwise, service-learning becomes a charitable exercise in which social inequality is perpetuated rather than attended to (Asghar & Rowe, 2017).

Finally, reflection is at the heart of meaning-making in service-learning. It involves a deliberate, ongoing examination of how one relates to others, particularly the poor and marginalized (Adarlo, 2020). In this study, Catholic social teaching provided a potent guide for the study participants to reflect on and make sense of their service-learning. These opportunities for theological reflection helped them assume the role of agents of change in society.

## **Practical Implications**

The findings of this study have several practical implications for institutions of higher education and teachers. First, a curriculum that explicitly incorporates the principles of the Social Change Model of Leadership Development can be designed to ensure that service-learning can offer students meaningful opportunities to be effective leaders in social change. Second, opportunities for guided reflection should be provided to students so that they can connect their experiences in service-learning with their personal growth and leadership development. Frameworks for reflection, such as Catholic social teaching, can help students examine their experiences in service-learning from ethical, social, and cultural perspectives. Third, long-term engagement in service-learning can be considered so that students have more time to develop meaningful relationships with the community, gain a deeper understanding of community dynamics, and contribute to sustainable change. Fourth, a range of service-learning opportunities can be explored to expose students to various communities, contexts, and challenges. Diversity in experience can broaden students' perspectives and enhance their leadership capacity. Finally, provisions should be in place for reciprocity. Valuing the needs and aspirations of the community helps prevent the imposing of external solutions that may not be suitable or sustainable in their context. Engaging the community throughout the service-learning process also empowers them to take ownership of initiatives that directly affect their lives.

## Conclusion

This case study explores the enduring influence of service-learning on leadership development among graduates engaged in a public health care setting in the Philippines as part of their coursework while in college. Using the Social Change Model as a theoretical lens, this study found transformative leadership to be a long-lasting impression of service-learning among graduates. This transformative leadership involves self-awareness (consciousness of self), authenticity (congruence), commitment to action (commitment), relationship building (collaboration), shared vision (common purpose), respect for others (civility), and a sense of social responsibility (citizenship).

This qualitative inquiry also examined which aspects of community engagement in service-learning contributed to graduates' understanding of their role as catalysts of change in society. Findings from this study revealed that exposure to real-world situations and opportunities for practical application (reality), immersion in the day-to-day life of the community (reciprocity), and occasions to make sense of their community engagement (reflection) can contribute to meaning-making in service-learning. Without these instances of meaning-making, transformative leadership would not ensue.

This longitudinal follow-up provided further evidence of service-learning as a high-impact pedagogical practice for teaching transformative leadership, which is necessary to promote quality of life in society. Other institutions of higher education can explore the use of service-learning as a teaching method, given its enduring influence on leadership development.

## Limitations and Further Research

The theoretical and practical contributions of this study on leadership development in service-learning must be considered, given several limitations. First, there could be a selection bias because the sample voluntarily participated in service-learning. Further studies should investigate leadership development among students whose service-learning is mandatory. Second, the study participants could have offered socially desirable responses during the focus group discussions. Future research should ensure anonymity and data confidentiality to gather candid responses from the study participants. Third, this study's findings may not be descriptive of other higher education institutions, as this research was conducted in a faith-based educational institution with a strong emphasis on leadership formation among its students alongside its rich tradition of service to the community. Further studies can benefit from conducting a mixed-methods study at multiple sites to examine similarities and differences. Finally, other factors, such as differences in background and prior experiences among the study participants, may have predisposed them to develop leadership capabilities that fit the Social Change Model. Future studies should examine in depth the influence of these other factors.

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### About the Authors

Genejane M. Adarlo is an associate professor and the program director of the Health Sciences Program in the School of Science and Engineering at Ateneo de Manila University.

Urduja C. Amor is a lecturer of the Health Sciences Program in the School of Science and Engineering at Ateneo de Manila University.

Agnes D. Garciano is an associate professor of the Mathematics Department in the School of Science and Engineering at Ateneo de Manila University.

Juliet Q. Dalagan is the vice president for Higher Education at Xavier University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Genejane M. Adarlo through email at [gado@ateneo.edu](mailto:gado@ateneo.edu) or through mobile number +63917 628 4299.