

Implementing Principles of Community in the Ambassador Program

Elizabeth A. Foreman
0020 Curtiss Hall
513 Farmhouse Lane
Iowa State University
Ames, IA 50010
(515) 294-4548
bforeman@iastate.edu

Breanna R. Wetzler

Marcus D. Jansen

Kayla C. Toennies

Isabella J. Shehab

Riley M. Wilgenbusch

Implementing Principles of Community in the Ambassador Program

Introduction/Need for Innovation

In July of 2005, a student government-appointed committee drafted six principles that exemplified the kind of community that Iowa State University could and should aspire to be. These principles sought to inspire a higher level of respect, open mindedness and community among the university community and included, *respect, purpose, cooperation, richness of diversity, freedom from discrimination, and honest and respectful expression of ideas*. The *Principles of Community* were subsequently endorsed by key campus groups and leadership. However, awareness and intentional implementation varied across campus.

The role of out-of-classroom experience is oftentimes perceived as an opportunity for students to increase their social and personal growth and is overlooked as an opportunity for valuable learning and skill development. Researchers and practitioners have suggested that exposure to a wide variety of out of classroom experiences provide concrete experiences for students to learn new concepts and should not be overlooked as opportunities to reach desired outcomes (Ewing, Bruce, & Ricketts, 2009; Foreman & Retallick, 2012). Foreman and Retallick (2013) suggested that faculty and staff should work in a partnership with student leaders to create meaningful educational activities as a part of out-of-classroom experiences. This collaboration must be intentional.

The mission of the college ambassador program is to assist the college in reaching their undergraduate recruitment goals. The program has competitive membership and a tiered-committee structure designed to help the group reach their goals. The ambassador program has been utilized as an out-of-classroom laboratory where leadership was intentionally taught and practiced for over a decade. The purpose of this innovate idea poster is to describe how a college ambassador program implemented the university's principles of community.

Program Description:

The 2018-2019 school year was an opportunity to challenge students in new ways. During a brainstorming and goal-setting meeting held the week before classes started, members of the executive officer team recommended a focus on respecting differences and an increased understanding of the purpose of the organization by all ambassadors. While the students didn't label their ideas as *Principles of Community*, advisers recognized the similarities and helped the students make that connection. The executive officer team and advisers developed an action plan to integrate the *Principles of Community* into the ambassador organization. The executive officer team took ownership of the initiative and provided the leadership. The group decided to focus on each of the principles for two weeks during the fall semester.

For each of the principles, the process was as follows:

- **Leadership Team:** The ambassador leadership team meets weekly and is comprised of a representative from each of the six committees. During week 1 of each principle, the chair facilitated an activity during leadership team to introduce the concept and help members see relevance for themselves and the ambassador organization.
- **Committee meetings:** Ambassadors are assigned to serve on one of the six committees, which met the following week and the Leadership Team representative shared the information with their respective committees. Leadership team members were encouraged to emphasize the role the specific principle had on their committee goals and success.

- Leadership Team: During the following Leadership Team meeting, members reported back on their committee meeting discussions and one group was chosen to talk about that Principle at the main meeting with all 100 ambassadors the following week.
- Main meeting: All of the ambassadors meet as a large group every two weeks. At each meeting, one of the leadership team members talked about the concept and highlighted why this concept is important to their committee.

New ambassadors were chosen in October and a training was held for them in November. The chair led an in-depth activity with them to make them aware of the *Principles of Community* and begin to define the culture of ambassadors as one that values differences. Each spring, ambassadors hold a day and a half training retreat. The executive officer team developed and implemented two sessions for that retreat. *Telling Your Story* was a session that encouraged ambassadors to think about what experiences and characteristics made them unique and how that could be useful interacting with prospective students and their families. *Answering Difficult Questions* provided ambassadors a guideline for answering questions and an opportunity to apply that guideline to answer difficult questions concerning inclusion. Some of the scenarios/questions dealt with LGBTQ+ housing, International faculty members, and non-production agriculture majors.

In addition to these training sessions, the *Principles of Community* were kept in the forefront of ambassador's minds during the spring semester while planning activities and interacting with prospective students.

Results to Date/Implications:

- Ambassadors, not a part of the executive officer team, talked about *Principles of Community* during discussions related to activity planning and recruitment, indicating that they understood the principles and were able and had a desire to apply them.
- Ambassadors were better able to communicate the inclusivity values of the college to prospective students.
- Because of the involvement of ambassadors in their academic departments (i.e., committees, learning communities, and departmental clubs), this initiative has the potential for impact beyond the students themselves and the ambassador program.

Advice to Others:

- The success of this initiative was dependent on it being a student-driven initiative with support from the advisers.
- Context of the principles was important. Focusing on how each principle was related to ambassadors helped the concepts have immediate meaning/application.
- Engagement of students at all levels of the organization was key.
- Using university resources helped to challenge our thinking and strengthen the program.
- Varying approaches (i.e., meetings, new member training, and retreat) helped keep content fresh.

Costs/Resources Needed:

Significant staff time was needed to carry out this initiative. However, no out-of-pocket expenses were incurred.

References:

- Ewing, J. C., Bruce, J. A., & Ricketts, K. G. (2009). Effective leadership development for undergraduates: How important is active participation in collegiate organizations? *Journal of Leadership Education*, 7, 118-131.
- Foreman, E. A., & Retallick, M. S. (2012). Undergraduate involvement in extracurricular activities and leadership development in College of Agriculture and Life Sciences students. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 53(3), 111-123. doi: 10.5032/jae.2012.0311
- Foreman, E. A., & Retallick, M. S. (2013). Using involvement theory to examine the relationship between undergraduate participation in extracurricular activities and leadership development. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 12(2), 56-72.