

Challenging Students to *Do Good* through Service Beyond the Leadership Classroom

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Introduction/Need for Innovation of Idea

During 2020 and 2021 instructors implemented a weekly *Do Good Challenge* (DGC) in agricultural leadership courses to encourage students to think outside of the classroom and themselves by focusing on the needs of their community. These challenges were often simple and manageable, such as making cards for a children's hospital or doing something nice for a roommate. While the students were engaged in service-based activities, our larger vision was to inspire students as leaders to *do good* beyond the classroom and become more engaged with the needs of others, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Adding service components to the classroom positively impact course learning outcomes (Lovat & Clement, 2016). While hard to truly define, service learning "brings new life to the classroom, enhances performance on traditional measures of learning, increases student interest in the subject, teaches new problem-solving skills, and makes teaching more enjoyable" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 222). Service-based activities were an opportunity for students to implement leadership principles taught in our courses, making the learning process more personal. Service-based activities allow our students to practice being leaders in their communities through small acts of service. There is a challenge in higher education to go beyond teaching skills solely applicable to future careers by implementing student learning goals focused on citizenship and community responsibility (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). "Emphasizing service has the potential to enrich learning and renew communities" (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996, p. 221).

How It Works

The inspiration for the DGC arose from helping students see how their leadership can make a positive impact on the many problems of their community. These problems can seem intimidating for one person to tackle by themselves; but, when a classroom of 20 students commits to doing one good deed each week, no matter how small, a huge impact is made in the community. Students create and have ownership for the challenges each week. As instructors, we do not focus on the size or scale of the deed, but instead emphasize the genuine value and benefit of caring for others. Small deeds can lead to a large community impact.

The DGC begins the first week of class. The instructor chooses the first challenge as an example, then allows students to suggest and select ideas for all future weeks. Students have a full week to complete each challenge unless a multi-week project is chosen. Each week, a reflective discussion about the outcome of the challenge is held in class, and a new challenge is started. It is important to note each challenge is optional and does not impact students' course grades. The hope is as students put their leadership into practice by serving others intrinsically, the positive impact they see made in the community motivates their continued engagement.

Results to Date

Students completed many acts of kindness at varying levels of impact in the community through the weekly DGC. Some of the selected challenges were sending cards to the local children's hospital and nursing home, supporting friends in multiple ways, sending thoughtful

words to loved ones, doing the dishes for a roommate, and raking a neighbor's leaves. One class coordinated a larger project by organizing a canned food drive within the department. Students collected and delivered canned food items to two local nonprofit organizations combating food insecurity in the community.

Instructors observed differing levels of involvement among groups of students. While response to the DGC was generally positive, overall class participation shifted depending on the challenge, students, and point of the semester. Several factors may have contributed to changes in student participation. Some students noted they liked the idea but found it difficult to participate when class commitment was low or there were personal time constraints. Student feedback showed they liked the involvement of creating the challenges and especially enjoyed *Do Good for Yourself Challenges*, like bringing food to class for everyone to share. Many students reported feeling burnt-out and stressed due to school and the pandemic; these types of challenges were refreshing for them. Students reported they have continued to incorporate small acts of kindness for others into their daily lives since participating in the DGC during leadership classes.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

When implementing DGCs in the classroom, it is important to approach the initiative realistically; otherwise, students may become disenchanted and disengaged. It is important to check in with students periodically, as their personal lives can impact participation. For faculty interested in exploring service-based activities, development must include a clear understanding of what service learning is, benefits for faculty and students, and the requisite investments of time (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996). There are also several areas the DGC can be improved. First, we encourage instructors to actively participate in the challenges. Modeling good deeds to students helps encourage class participation. When picking a challenge, encourage students to guide the suggestions and class decision. Instructors can provide suggestions, but students should primarily lead the weekly challenges. Finally, instructors should keep a spreadsheet to track weekly accomplishments. At the end of the semester, show students their collective community impact as a class in a visual manner. By visualizing their impact, students may become more motivated to continue the challenge to *do good* as leader beyond course enrollment.

Costs/Resources Needed

Time and effort are the main resources needed to implement the DGC in your course. There are very limited costs and resources associated with the DGC, as it is dependent on the ideas and efforts of the students. As the initiative grows over time, however, the need may arise for programs or departments to support the efforts of students through minor resources such as project supplies, advertising on social media, and facilities.

References

- Bringle, R. G., & Hatcher, J. A. (1996). Implementing service learning in higher education. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 67(2), 221-239. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2943981>.
- Lovat, T., & Clement, N. (2016). Service learning as holistic values pedagogy. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 39(2), 115-129. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825916628548>