Modeling a Diverse and Democratic America:

THE MICHIGAN COMMUNITY SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Student, faculty, community, and staff participants in a scholarly program at the University of Michigan are attempting to create a microcosmic representation of a country built on shared work and celebration of diverse perspectives. The program's director describes the community's vision in action.

BY DAVID SCHOEM

TOO OFTEN, innovation in undergraduate education unfolds something like this: the latest, best idea is implemented by itself, as an add-on to existing curricular and cocurricular practice. While most of the student experience remains the same as it was before the innovation, the new idea offers a twist: a service learning class here, a learning community there, a toe-dip into civic engagement, or an isolated opportunity for student leadership. By contrast, the Michigan Community Scholars Program (MCSP) at the University of Michigan is an attempt to integrate some of the most successful undergraduate initiatives into a holistic, diversity-focused, and democratic educational experience. This initiative, based on the traditional concept of a community of scholars, is relatively small (some one hundred to one hundred twenty-five first-year students have entered the two-year residential learning community program each year since 1999), but those of us who are involved believe that the ideas embedded in it and its impacts on students are substantial.

The mission of the Michigan Community Scholars Program is to be "a residential learning community emphasizing deep learning, engaged community, meaningful civic engagement/community service learning, and intercultural understanding and dialogue. Students, faculty, community partners, and staff think critically about issues of community, seek to model a just, diverse, and democratic community, and wish to make a difference throughout their lives as participants and leaders involved in local, national, and global communities." Our program's vision is to be experimental, socially and intellectually diverse, supportive of the learning and ways of knowing of faculty, students, and student affairs professionals, and open to the wisdom of both campus scholars and the experience of community practitioners. Features of the program include small classes taught in residence, service-learning projects, leadership opportunities, social programs, study groups, and tutoring support.

MCSP is built on the premise that for too long, education has been trapped in functional and philosophical silos, unable to bridge initiatives and forge partnerships for the common cause of facilitating student learning. Colleges and universities are typically limited by boundaries that keep academic faculty from working closely with student affairs professionals; that separate research from teaching and faculty from students; and, particularly relevant to our work, that divide undergraduate reform initiatives. Educators today may talk about community, but too often, they keep neighboring communities at arm's length. At the same time, ironically, theoretical representations of our research and teaching advocate integrative thinking, collaborative problem solving, and seamless implementation of educational initiatives and programs. The leading higher education associations, such as the Association of American Colleges and Universities, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, and the American College Personnel Association, have developed clear statements of philosophy and action that attempt to spur colleges and universities to put these beliefs into practice. Still, we lack enough models to begin moving forward from statements of philosophy to good practice.

ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM

SINCE 1998, the Michigan Community Scholars Program has followed a careful process for making changes in the undergraduate experience for participating students at the University of Michigan. As I described in the *Change* article "Transforming Undergraduate Education: Moving Beyond Distinct Undergraduate Initiatives," the initial steps we took included (1) conceptualizing the vision, (2) acting with intentionality, (3) leading as boundary crossers and collaborators, and (4) taking responsibility for the whole of the curriculum and cocurriculum and having a degree of control over it. The first essential step was to envision our new program broadly and comprehensively, conceptualizing it as a model for the very best in higher education. Instead of restricting our thinking to the specifics of building a residential learning community, as was the institutional goal at the time of its creation, my colleagues and I set our goal more broadly as the creation of an ideal, diverse, small college community with learning at its center. That the institution had an important but more limited goal for the Michigan Community Scholars Program represents a broader critical lesson: educators on this and other campuses have regular opportunities to effect successful change in higher education, whether or not such changes are institutionally mandated.

The second step was to thoughtfully implement the vision of MCSP through program design. At this stage, we wanted to infuse the program with an integration of best practices in undergraduate education, which, in our case, meant creating opportunities for community-based learning, diversity, and intergroup dialogue and for scholarly interaction among faculty and students. As Mark Ryan has described in *A Collegiate Way of Living,* residential learning communities offer an ideal setting for such interaction. The intent of our design was to provide for a successful academic and intellectual experience for each individual in the program and for the community as a whole. At the same time, we remained vigilant against recreating traditional divisions between program components. We knew we could easily default to conventional boundaries unless we remained committed against them. As a result, our leadership and decision-making processes are consciously collaborative.

Our next step was to conceptualize our leadership roles as boundary crossers. As leaders, we realized the necessity of understanding different cultures within the institution, relating to people from different backgrounds (in terms of social identity, academic discipline, professional role, and educational perspective), and being comfortable moving across and within sectors. At MCSP, we rely on the support, resources, and ideas of many from academic affairs and student affairs, including people from the College of Literature, Science and the Arts; university housing; the provost's office; academic departments; the advising center; the Center for Research on Learning and Teaching; the Ginsberg Center for Community Service and Learning; the Program on Intergroup Relations; the Office of Academic and Multicultural Initiatives; undergraduate admissions; the development office; and community agencies. We have found success in these partnerships through a shared vision of undergraduate education and through completion of common tasks.

In each of our partner units, we rely on individuals at every level of the organization. We work with the dean and associate and assistant deans, professional and clerical members of the budget staff, human resource personnel, and facilities and media staff. We collaborate with directors of the Housing Division, hall directors, resident advisers, and placement, facilities, and dining staff.

One goal is to help each member of this community, as well as its partners, feel a sense of pride in ownership and shared responsibility for the program. For example, because MCSP is designed to encourage consideration of the curricular and cocurricular experiences of each student, faculty members remain mindful of the out-of-class experiences of students, and student affairs professionals concern themselves with what occurs in the classroom. One result is that participating faculty and

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student affairs professionals are relatively comfortable in what has traditionally been the other's domain.

Throughout the process of launching and building this program, the University of Michigan has been exceptional in its willingness to support the good ideas of entrepreneurial faculty and staff. Within certain parameters, it has given considerable independence to the leaders of MCSP to make sound educational judgments about its direction. This degree of control over our own unit permits all of us—directors, faculty, staff, and community partners—to develop, implement, and take responsibility for conceptual approaches that otherwise may not easily find their way into much more traditional institutional structures.

BRINGING THE WHOLE TOGETHER

AS AN ACADEMIC PROGRAM housed in a residence hall, MCSP is a natural location for collaborations across a number of domains. Sponsorship, funding, and oversight for MCSP come from the College of Literature, Science and the Arts and from the university's housing office. Courses are delivered through academic departments, but these courses and other components of the program are physically located in a residence hall.

Examples of how this collaboration works abound. An MCSP professor from the School of Music has proposed to pilot-test a universitywide outreach program to bring the performing arts to undergraduate students in cocurricular settings. The MCSP hall director leads a summer reading program initiative for incoming students. Student leaders help to facilitate course discussions on service learning and a method of discourse known as "intergroup dialogue," which may then carry into the

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students' residence. A faculty member is in a position to take note of a sudden change in a student's class attendance and performance and to contact the MCSP directors, who in turn may ask the college's academic advising office and the resident director to check on the student's well-being. MCSP faculty are positioned to develop a grant proposal for a cross-disciplinary instruction project that includes evening cocurricular programming to be jointly coordinated by faculty and housing staff. The faculty director and associate director are routinely concerned with and involved in student development work as well as teaching and curricular issues. The program draws on expertise in student affairs regarding course offerings in intergroup dialogue and service learning, and the program faculty lead students in arts programming, on field trips, and in evening discussions in the residence hall.

While the structural and administrative arrangements of MCSP represent an essential institutional statement of support for collaboration, MCSP's success in collaboration derives chiefly from a strong conceptual framework—a focus on community and learning that Fred Newmann and Donald Oliver have articulated in their article "Education and Community," Barbara Leigh Smith and her colleagues have described in *Learning Communities: Reforming Undergraduate Education,* and Jodi Levine Laufgraben and Nancy Shapiro have written about in *Sustaining and Improving Learning Communities.* It is the program administrators' collective understanding from these and other sources that achievement of the highest quality in both building community and facilitating learning requires that we draw from every quarter of the institution.

Along the way, we have discovered that the kind of collaboration required to run this program is anything but natural and easy and that this shared work is quite foreign in typical institutional structures. We also know that many residential colleges, residential learning communities, and residential education programs align themselves separately with one division or another of a sponsoring institution and, as a result, are continually

working to manage conflicting interests from nonparticipating offices. We have attempted to prevent this through collaborative leadership, which, of course, carries challenges of its own.

Goodwill, shared vision, and detailed protocols in regard to practices such as budget reviews or even the purchase of furniture and equipment do not always prevent these conflicts from arising. In these instances, success of the program depends on the day-to-day hard work of the MCSP directors, faculty, staff, and students. Conflicts can stem from each unit operating under different calendar cycles and procedures and, some days, can seem to loom larger than the shared purpose. Given the daily work of making this program function, the new vision, new structures, and new practices must be accompanied by daily behaviors and attitudes that conscientiously run counter to traditional practices that tend to divide. With some stumbles and growing pains, MCSP has been able to recognize and act on both large and small issues in order to continue to offer this program.

LAUNCHING THE SCHOLARLY COMMUNITY

MEMBERS OF THE MCSP community came together early in the program's history for a yearlong community development project involving a series of retreats and other structured engagements. At the same time, MCSP's faculty, staff, students, and community partners visited several social service agencies in Ann Arbor, Detroit, and Ypsilanti to learn more about these partners' mission and function. During this time, MCSP community members were also invited to the residence hall in which the program is housed to observe classes being held there.

Since those early efforts, the MCSP faculty and staff, together, have developed a grant proposal for teaching *about* community *in* community. The MCSP faculty, residence hall staff, and other student affairs professionals envision this as an opportunity for both interdisciplinary exchange and integration of curricular and cocurricular learning. Through this and other projects, members of the MCSP faculty and staff view their learning as a shared and communal process, not an exclusive or competitive one. There is a culture of welcoming diverse disciplinary perspectives and intellectual exchange among faculty from departments and schools as varied as African American and African Studies, American Culture, Asian Languages and Literature, Economics, Education, Engineering, English, History, Information, Medicine, Music, Natural Resources, Psychology, Romance Languages, Sociology, and Women's Studies.

These intellectual strengths of MCSP can sometimes raise questions from those with more traditional academic views. Some with established perspectives may be suspicious of the notion that faculty, students, student affairs professionals, and community partners are equal contributors to intellectual life. While interdisciplinary scholarship is said to be valued on many campuses, discipline-based work still rules the organizational structure of many academic departments, and applications for grants to support research and teaching are still typically crafted, often unwittingly, to reward and reinforce existing disciplinary and curricular boundaries.

MCSP has addressed these concerns by carefully selecting a strong faculty that can focus on its interdisciplinary mission. The MCSP faculty director personally recruits instructors and tenured faculty but excludes faculty members who have not yet achieved tenure from the recruiting list in acknowledgment of the largely discipline-based research responsibilities in which they are typically involved at this point in their career. MCSP faculty members are selected for their interest in embracing a scholarly life of exploration, discovery, questioning, and understanding and practicing different ways of knowing, writing, and publishing. Individually, they are known as some of the finest teachers, leading researchers, and creative innovators on the University of Michigan campus, who are also committed to building a strong cross-disciplinary scholarly community. These faculty members and their collaborators are central to creating MCSP's intellectually stimulating environment.

Participating faculty members recognize their good fortune in being able to learn from the perspectives of a diverse group of MCSP students, staff, and community partners. For example, faculty members recognized early on that teaching about the topic of community required the participation of community partners in the teaching process. Similarly, the faculty realized that housing and other student affairs professionals associated with MCSP should participate in monthly faculty seminars.

In MCSP's community building, attention is focused on creating a sense of safety, trust, ownership, commitment, and involvement among its members. These characteristics of a strong community are reinforced by faculty in their classrooms, staff and student leaders in the residence halls, community partners at service sites, trained student facilitators of class discussions and intergroup dialogues, and peer advisers and mentors, who set the norm in helping new students to become comfortable in a diverse, engaged, and respectful community. The program directors and staff also make a point of getting to know each student participant personally and of being highly accessible to each student, faculty, staff, and community partner.

LINKING DIVERSITY AND OTHER UNDERGRADUATE INITIATIVES

A HALLMARK of this community of scholars is its focus on achieving academic excellence through the development of a rich multicultural environment. Throughout the history of the program, 50 percent of the undergraduate participants have been students of color and international students, while 50 percent have been non-Hispanic white students. For the past three years, retention rates for all students after one year of college have been above 95 percent, and in the most recent year, 100 percent of students in traditionally underrepresented groups were retained after one year of college. These rates are higher than overall University of Michigan retention rates and higher than expected on the basis of the students' academic profiles. MCSP has intentionally implemented curricular and cocurricular program features that are known to significantly improve retention and academic achievement among all students. For example, the program offers first-year seminars, close faculty-student contact, and participation in residentially based common curriculum. It also helps students develop a strong sense of connection to the university through activities such as community service. Each of these components is integrated with the program's diversity education initiatives.

At MCSP, the classrooms and the residential community are diverse at multiple levels, and students are encouraged to engage one another both intellectually and socially. The faculty and staff of the program are also ethnically and socially diverse and share a common goal of addressing issues of diversity in their courses and in cocurricular programs. Academic goals for all students are set high, and students are expected to excel academically and to be active participants in the community. MCSP student leaders set an important tone. Like many of MCSP's first-year students, student leaders in the program came to college from mostly segregated neighborhoods and schools. However, MSCP students represent a move away from segregation and separation to such a degree that they were recently featured on a program of CNN's *Anderson Cooper 360* commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the Supreme Court decision to desegregate schools in *Brown* v. *Board of Education*. Students who participate in MSCP share a commitment to live out a model of a diverse country and world in which their comfort zones are broadened and intergroup dialogue skills are strengthened.

Nonetheless, conflict among students has not been completely eliminated in MSCP. Early in the history of the program, the residence hall door of one African American student was defaced with hate-filled, racist language. In the wake of the incident, the community responded with support and encouragement for the victimized student. The student, comfortable in his relationship with his MCSP first-year seminar instructor, brought the incident to him, and together they raised the issue to the entire first-year seminar class. The class organized what became a campuswide initiative called "Stop the Hate" in which flyers were posted on residence hall doors and bulletin boards throughout campus. At the same time, the MCSP faculty, staff, and its community partners authored and distributed a letter to the student body that reaffirmed the values and ideals of the diverse MCSP community, and the MCSP directors, resident hall director, and resident advisers facilitated several discussions for student residents and for all members of the MCSP community.

In addition to making measured responses to conflicts, the program has attempted to build formal structures to foster a safe, knowledge-based, and welcoming environment for diversity. The MCSP first-semester first-year seminar, its second-semester course encompassing service learning and dialogue, and its one-credit program introduction class all heavily focus on issues of community and diversity. Students are also given daily structured opportunities to work closely with peers from a wide variety of backgrounds.

MCSP has been built to prevent the separation that typically exists between diversity initiatives and other activities in undergraduate education. We have seen that too often across the country, committees are established to separately address diversity and other undergraduate education issues. Different sets of faculty and administrators are invited to attend to concerns and initiatives. At the same time, on most campuses, as is true at the University of Michigan, faculty and students have lived in neighborhoods and attended schools in which they have had little contact with people from different racial, ethnic, religious, or economic backgrounds. At many colleges and universities, intergroup relations are sometimes viewed as the responsibility of student affairs, not of the faculty and curriculum. MCSP is designed so that responsibility for diversity education is shared among all members of the community.

Research conducted for two high-profile Supreme Court cases, *Gratz et al.* v. *Bollinger et al.* and *Grutter* v. *Bollinger et al.,* provided compelling evidence in support of the benefits of a diverse campus environment in promoting student learning. These cases, initiated at the University of Michigan in regard to the implementation of affirmative action policies, confirmed that students who learn in a diversity-rich environment demonstrate deeper cognitive understanding and a greater capacity to see multiple perspectives. A diverse scholarly community pro-

vides the opportunity for students and faculty to learn from lived experience. The program is designed to allow MCSP students and their faculty members to closely interact in the small seminar course and to allow further discussion in the residence hall and during meals. To facilitate informal discussion, faculty members conduct office hours in the residence halls and eat lunch in the residence hall cafeteria. Many MCSP faculty members invite students to dinner in their home, attend campus cultural events with their students, and participate in community activities and service projects with their classes.

MCSP's service learning courses combine service learning with intergroup dialogue. In *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community, and Workplace,* Sylvia Hurtado and I describe this type of discourse as "a form of democratic practice, engagement, problem-solving, and education involving face-to-face, focused, facilitated, and confidential discussions occurring over time between two or more groups of people defined by their different social identities" (p. 6). Ximena Zúñiga also offered a description of intergroup dialogue in "Bridging Differences Through Dialogue" in *About Campus.* Formal opportunities for MCSP students to participate in this form of dialogue help prepare them for productive interactions with one another, in and outside the classroom, and to participate in service learning experiences in ethnically and socially diverse neighborhoods. The required one-credit program introduction course is also structured to include large-group sessions on community, diversity, and service. Weekly small-group discussions of these and other issues are led by undergraduate MCSP residence hall advisers. Overall, we continue to be inspired by the results of our approach.

FINAL THOUGHTS

THE MICHIGAN Community Scholar Program began with a clear vision to be more than another higher education initiative operating within its own silo. We envisioned it as a community of scholars that pulls together the very best of higher education practice, with learning and community as its centerpiece. MCSP depends on vigilance and intentionality to stay true to its vision in the structures it creates, the goals it sets, the people it attracts, and in daily practice.

MCSP's commitment to boundary-crossing leadership and collaboration has allowed it to create a viable alternative higher education model. Interunit collaboration is the lifeblood of the program's operations. Intellectual and programmatic engagement among faculty, student affairs professionals, students, and community partners as well as active engagement across social identities are at the center of the community. Our intent is

no less than to create a successful model of a diverse and truly democratic America.

The entire MCSP community takes responsibility for its success and health. That collective responsibility is coupled with an essential degree of independent control over the program's destiny within a context of institutional support and goodwill. Striking this delicate balance between independent responsibility and central oversight is allowing the program to flourish.

A fitting tribute to the vision of the Michigan Community Scholars Program was a recent collaborative writing project involving its faculty, student affairs professionals, community partners, and students. These individuals met over several months to deliberate, collaborate, and ultimately coauthor chapters for *Engaging the Whole of Service-Learning, Diversity, and Learning Communities,* edited by Joseph Galura and his colleagues. The project allowed its more than forty participants to engage in the kind of deep learning, community building, and intercultural understanding and dialogue that distinguish MCSP. Eleven chapters were coauthored by teams of faculty members and community partners, student affairs professionals and students, and faculty and students. The book, both in process and in content, represents what is best about our community of scholars.

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