ABSTRACT

This chapter discusses the CUNY Youth Ambassador Program, an undergraduate mentorship and leadership development program with an emphasis on global sustainability that focuses on the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, specifically Goal Number 4: Quality Education. The creation and development of this program is one way two educators at the City University of New York responded to the global call for action on quality education, by initiating a collaboration with UNESCO to seed a movement of informed youth undergraduate advocates active in education spaces. This chapter showcases the framework and components of the CUNY Youth Ambassador Program and the aforementioned collaboration, as well as the experience and impact on the undergraduate students involved in this initiative.

INTRODUCTION

The CUNY Youth Ambassador (CYA) Program is an undergraduate mentorship and leadership development program at the City University of New York (CUNY). This community-engagement initiative increases global awareness and leads to local action by introducing undergraduate students to the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the ways young people throughout the world are addressing these goals.
Global Pull of Community Engagement

At the center of the CYA Program is an undergraduate student, the CUNY Youth Ambassador student, also known at CUNY as the CYA. While the program is youth driven, the student does work with mentors who help to contextualize the undergraduate youth ambassador’s experience and to guide further exploration and eventual development of the student’s “Signature Project.” The Signature Project is a community event and advocacy efforts to inform the CYA’s CUNY peers about the SDGs and to allow the CYA to become a mentor for other undergraduate students in the CUNY system.

A unique aspect of the CUNY Youth Ambassador Program is the CYA’s attendance at the Winter Youth Assembly, a UN-related platform created to elevate the voices of young people in international dialogues, to empower youth to advocate for future generations, and to mobilize youth as agents of impactful change. The CYA attends the assembly during the first month of involvement in the program, providing a contextualized introduction to the SDGs. The CYA’s participation at the Winter Youth Assembly is made possible through a collaboration between the CUNY program and UNESCO (the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), established during 2017, the year the program was created. After attending the Winter Youth Assembly, the CYA continues to read and to learn about the SDGs and global education. The student then develops and implements the Signature Project. This occurs during the course of one or two academic semesters. The learning and Signature Project are achieved via a close mentorship relationship that encompasses blog posts, face-to-face meetings and weekly check-in emails with mentors, as the CYA processes the Winter Youth Assembly and develops a voice as a community-engaged scholar on the specific CUNY campus where he or she is based.

This chapter presents a dual case study of the CYA Program and its implementation to date, including the program components, framework, and tools found to be essential for program delivery. CUNY and the SDGs provide context for understanding how a collaboration with UNESCO was established. Data, collected from the reflective blogs written by two undergraduate CUNY students, provide evidence of the program’s potential for enhancing personal growth and developing community-engaged scholars. The students’ enthusiasm for learning about global issues and for sharing that excitement with other young people who are involved globally is clearly evident in their writings.

BACKGROUND

In the early 1900s, John Dewey (1916) first stressed the value of providing real-world, hands-on educational experiences to facilitate and to deepen learning. He noted that when educational experiences are relevant and meaningful to students, students better understand the reasons why they are learning the academic content. He also described how embedding learning in real world examples and experiences helps students understand and value service to their community. To Dewey, and to many educators since, there are strong connections between education and community engagement.

Federal initiatives throughout the 20th century stressed the importance of community engagement and community service, both for students and for the broader public. The creation of the Civilian Conservation Corps in 1933, the Peace Corps in 1961, and Volunteers in Service to America in 1965 promoted civic engagement and conservation through work opportunities in the United States and abroad (Bass, 2013). In 1950, as part of the White House Conference on Children and Youth, Congress formally endorsed the value of connecting community and schools, a message reinforced by the 1970 convening (Congress of the U.S., 1971). By the 1980s, many viewed community engagement as an important component of higher education. Organizations and federal initiatives—such as the Campus Outreach
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