

2016

## Design Thinking Accelerated Leadership: Transforming Self, Transforming Community

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### ScholarWorks Citation

Lake, Danielle L.; Ricco, Michael E.; and Whipps, Judy D., "Design Thinking Accelerated Leadership: Transforming Self, Transforming Community" (2016). *Funded Articles*. 94.  
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Source: *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. 65, No. 3-4 (2016), pp. 159-177

Published by: Penn State University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5325/jgeneeduc.65.3-4.0159>

Accessed: 30-03-2018 15:32 UTC

## REFERENCES

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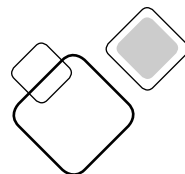
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# Design Thinking Accelerated Leadership: Transforming Self, Transforming Community

DANIELLE LAKE, MICHAEL E. RICCO, AND JUDY WHIPPS

**ABSTRACT** | Higher education institutions are continually seeking to recruit nontraditional adult students yet struggle at the same time to meet their needs effectively. The following case study offers strategies to address this situation by documenting the pedagogical design and initial outcomes of an interdisciplinary, nineteen-month leadership-themed liberal studies undergraduate degree completion program at Grand Valley State University. As an innovative, accelerated, hybrid cohort model, it incorporates a wide range of high-impact practices focused on developing the skills leaders use and employers require. The curriculum integrates practices from motivational and experiential learning, community-based learning, and design thinking to scaffold students' learning across their courses. The program thereby encourages students to wrestle with the complexity of social issues in their communities and develop the skills and virtues necessary for addressing those problems. As a case study, this article is particularly relevant for educators and administrators hoping to uncover a means for catalyzing innovative co-participatory engagement projects that engage with the needs of the surrounding community in a format supportive of nontraditional learners.

**KEYWORDS** | accelerated curriculum, community-based learning, design thinking, liberal education, leadership

Adult learners' motivations to return to higher education often differ from those of traditional students. They expect that their education will help them advance their careers and be relevant to their life experiences. They also need an education flexible enough to accommodate busy work and family lives (Knowles, 1984; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Wlodkowski, 2008). Because of this, designing a curriculum for adults based on the goals of general and liberal

*Journal of General Education: A Curricular Commons of the Humanities and Sciences*, Vol. 65, No. 3-4, 2016  
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education requires an innovative approach. This article documents one such approach by highlighting the philosophy behind and initial outcomes of an innovative nineteen-month liberal studies degree completion program rooted in community partnerships. We have found that engaging adult learners in community problem-solving projects through design thinking methodologies meets the students' motivational needs and results in deep learning. The innovative design of this program is intended to address the unique challenges of nontraditional adult students, as reflected in the initial findings.

In this program students enroll in cohorts, completing one accelerated five-week class at a time; they earn either a B.A. or a B.S. degree with a major in liberal studies and an emphasis in leadership studies. Courses combine in-seat, online, and community-based coursework. The curriculum draws on courses from management, public administration, and liberal studies. The program integrates best practices from accelerated learning (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2010), design thinking (Morris & Warman, 2015), interdisciplinarity (Repko, Szostak, & Buchberger, 2014), community-based learning (Miller & Archuletta, 2013; Wagner & Pigza, 2016), and leadership studies (Northouse, 2013; Preskill & Brookfield, 2009). The faculty select broad social justice-based themes emerging from the community for each cohort. These themes have proved to be a catalyst for actively integrating content between courses and helping students develop deep engagement practices that encourage reciprocity. Such practices break down the divide between knowledge acquisition and knowledge use, providing students with hands-on, real-life opportunities to see the value of their educational efforts. Our experience demonstrates that this pedagogical approach helps students integrate learning across artificial disciplinary divides, wrestle with the complexity of social issues in their communities, and develop the skills and virtues necessary for addressing such issues.

This article documents the applied philosophical commitments underlying the design of the program, its innovative community-based infrastructure, and the initial findings from the first cohorts of graduates, ultimately offering recommendations valuable for those seeking programs, methods, and processes to advance models of collegial engagement on intractable problems. We begin by contextualizing the program, briefly explicating the philosophical and practical commitments behind its creation as well as documenting its basic structure. After documenting the collaborative and emergent process from which the program was created (faculty learning communities, consultations with national experts in accelerated programming, curriculum mapping), we document the experimental pedagogical methods ultimately employed. In the end, we highlight the merits and challenges of this program

from faculty and student perspectives, offering a set of recommendations for educators interested in employing a similar approach.

## Practical Framework and Program Development

The initial development of the program was unusual in several ways—it emerged from collaboration between disciplines, as well as an essential partnership among faculty, student support/administrative staff, and Instructional Design/Information Technology. In winter 2013, a faculty member from Liberal Studies began meeting with the director of Adult and Continuing Studies to discuss how the institution might assist students interested in returning to college to complete their degree. From these initial conversations, a general framework emerged. With this vision in place, a faculty study group around adult learning was convened using Wlodkowski's *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn* (2008) as a curriculum framework guide. Meanwhile, the proposal for an emphasis on leadership within the liberal studies major made its way through the curriculum approval process. The program ultimately unfolded through a collaborative and emergent process, becoming a unique interdisciplinary degree completion opportunity for returning adult students.

In winter 2014 Adult and Continuing Studies began recruitment, and student support staff and faculty partnered for initial advising. Organizationally, the program follows the university calendar, including application, registration, payment deadlines, holidays, and more. While this is not the case for many accelerated programs nationally, it allows students some flexibility if they need to move back and forth between accelerated and regular coursework. Students maintain three-quarter status for financial aid purposes. The program began offering classes in August 2014, graduating its first cohort of adult learners nineteen months later in April 2016. A second cohort started in winter 2015 (at a regional campus). Since then, the program has admitted a new cohort each fall.

Students enter the program with approximately seventy-two earned college credits. They complete consecutive accelerated five-week courses, meeting one night a week throughout each semester, graduating in nineteen months. While the program is designed for students who have finished most of their lower-level general education requirements, it also fulfills six general education requirements ("Philosophy and Literature," "Social Science," "U.S. Diversity," "Global Perspectives," and two upper-level "General Education Issues" requirements). The program places heavy expectations on students, asking that they enter ready for hybrid and accelerated learning and requiring that they spend eighteen–twenty-two hours a week on their studies once in the program (see the appendix for an overview of the curriculum model).

## The Philosophical Framework

The Liberal Studies Accelerated Leadership Program seeks to uphold three core commitments: educational access for adult learners, liberal education, and community engagement. The first commitment is to adult learners, those students who may have started college earlier in life yet, due to various life pressures, left college without a degree. A desire to provide these students with equitable access to college was the starting point for this work, particularly for Adult and Continuing Studies. The second commitment to the transformative power of liberal education for students and communities is central to the values of the academic department. As defined by the program, liberal education includes a broad base of learning, along with depth in a major that prepares students for encountering big questions, teaching the skills of reflection and engagement and developing a base for lifelong learning (Association of American Colleges and Universities, n.d.; Whipps, Lake, Pettibone, Wendland, & Wolverton, 2013). Thus, students in the program learn about the transformative power of liberal education in their first class and continue that dialogue throughout their studies. In fact, this commitment to liberal education is what led to the program's focus on leadership. The commitment to community-engaged learning emerged from the first two commitments and is aligned with the university's mission. We see community engagement as an opportunity for relational and experiential learning where students encounter the complexity of local issues and operate as creative partners in social change (Gallini & Moely, 2003; Longo & Gibson, 2016).

### Adult Learners

The Accelerated Leadership Program is intended for adult students (typically defined as age twenty-four+) with two or more years of work experience and junior status. According to 2014 census data (as reported by the Lumina Foundation), 29 percent of state residents had a bachelor's degree or higher, and 24.5 percent of residents over the age of twenty-five had "some college but no degree," while 10.3 percent of residents had only an associate's degree. That means that nearly 35 percent of our state's population could benefit financially and personally from a path to attain a bachelor's degree (Lumina Foundation, 2016). After verifying that the need was there, efforts turned to considering how we could design an educational approach to serve those students' needs. The expertise of the staff in Adult and Continuing Studies was essential in these dialogues.

While the needs, motivations, and best pedagogical practices in adult learning are well documented (see Knowles, 1984; Wlodkowski, 2008), most traditional college majors and classes are not designed around the needs of adult

learners. For instance, due to the busy and competing demands of adult lives, they often crave the predictability of a consistent schedule (Rosenberg, 2017). Normal college schedules—with courses that change timing from semester to semester—leave adult students uncertain of whether future courses will occur on a day and at a time that fits within their other commitments; such schedules generate additional concerns about whether students will be able to complete a program once they start. With this in mind, we decided to schedule every class session throughout the program on Tuesday night, ensuring that prospective students knew that they would be busy every Tuesday evening for the next nineteen months, which was helpful for family/work planning.

## Leadership as Liberal Education

Scholars have observed that the breadth of learning, along with the skills of citizenship that result from liberal education, is excellent preparation for leadership (Burlingame, 2009; Guthrie & Callahan, 2016; Wren, 2009). Liberal education develops reflective ethical capacities, communication skills, and cultural competence, as well as individuals who can create what Nussbaum (2004) calls “a critical public culture.” These are also the skills needed for leadership. (Leadership here refers to a positive influence on others at all levels, not only to those in positions of power.) Guthrie and Callahan (2016) point out that both liberal education and leadership education emphasize the “creation of active, global citizens” (p. 26). In today’s environment, the liberal studies program and its students often struggle with the connotations surrounding the term *liberal*. The term *leadership*, admittedly also ambiguous, may be a better way of broadly communicating the values of a liberal education. Learning is risky. Leadership is also risky. When we embark on a learning project, we open ourselves to change, to knowing and becoming someone different. When we engage in leadership work, not only do we open ourselves up to change; we work to create change in communities and organizations. Liberal education is about ethics and values, about reflecting on the highest possible good. Leadership is also about values, as it requires constant reflection on the ethical foundations of decision making. Liberal education encounters the big questions, historically and philosophically. Leadership requires that one learn from these encounters in ways that inform our actions in the world. Liberal education has traditionally been a preparation for citizenship. Leadership requires acting as a global citizen in every capacity, with an awareness of the impact of actions on others. Liberal education stresses the importance of diversity and cultural understanding. Without a deep cultural understanding, leadership will ultimately fail. A liberally educated person is

a lifelong learner. And in a world of fast-paced change, lifelong learning is a necessity for any contemporary leader.

## Faculty Development and Curriculum Mapping

The liberal studies major core classes are taught from humanities and social sciences perspectives, but the program is intentionally interdisciplinary. Because the major includes an “emphasis” or area of focus that can be individualized, we were able to select classes from around the university that meet the learning objectives of leadership. In writing the curriculum proposal for the emphasis in leadership, we considered the needs of returning adult students and looked at nearly two dozen model leadership programs (particularly the Jepson School of Leadership Studies, which is also committed to the liberal arts). In reviewing the learning objectives of the liberal studies major and the national models, our proposal focused on seven learning objectives for the emphasis, as follows:

### Leadership Learning Objectives

1. Ethics, Identity, and Values
2. Diversity and Cultural Competency
3. Interpersonal and Conflict Management Skills
4. Creative/Critical Decision Making
5. Problem-Solving Skills
6. Communication
7. Practice-Based Application and Synthesis

With a vision for the program in place, lead faculty applied for and received a \$15,000 internal Faculty Teaching and Learning grant, which supported a two-year training process for faculty, including bringing in outside consultants. Faculty meetings were held each month during the 2014 winter term, as we began the process of curriculum mapping. Faculty worked together to articulate course objectives, content, outcomes, assessment, and alignment. A curriculum mapping process led by an instructional designer with expertise in adult learning helped faculty identify where each course in the program introduced, reinforced, or required mastery of the seven learning goals. In addition, faculty read Wlodkowski and Ginsberg’s *Teaching Intensive and Accelerated Courses: Instruction that Motivates Learning* (2010), discussed adult learning and accelerated teaching pedagogy, and engaged in a full-day workshop with the book’s authors. Continuing to meet after the program began, faculty worked together to ensure that cohesive learning objectives were created and to discuss issues/problems as they arose.



## Engaging Through Design Thinking: Place- and Project-Based Community Collaborations

Given the impact and the relatively unique nature of our approach to accelerated learning for returning students, we next document how we embedded community engagement throughout the program. In particular, we note the value of selecting broad social justice–based themes for each cohort and harnessing design thinking processes. The value and challenges of this approach are illustrated through a number of examples of student-led community projects. The community-engaged dimensions of the program are particularly worth emphasizing, as it is largely assumed that the challenges and commitments of midlife (such as work obligations, family commitments, burgeoning health concerns) make community engagement impractical (if not impossible). These realities are likely why we have been unable to uncover any other accelerated programs in the United States engaging students in deep and integrated community-based work.

Selecting broad social justice–based community themes for each cohort has proved valuable along two fronts: such themes can generate a shared vision around which faculty can collaborate and curriculum can be scaffolded, while they simultaneously leave room for student and community ownership over the projects that ultimately emerge (Kecskes, 2015). For instance, working from a general theme of “Education and Empowerment,” one cohort of students spoke with parents and K–12 students about the challenges to educational attainment in an urban neighborhood that traditionally had low high school graduation rates and low college attendance. After studying and contextualizing the issue in place, a range of student-community projects emerged, including mentoring programs in local schools, bilingual student literacy projects, social media campaigns, and middle school–high school transition connections. As a general theme, the focus on education and empowerment helped faculty see community-based projects as an opportunity to ground course content in the realities of the surrounding community and to practice (and thereby test) course skills, through “inclusive, collaborative, and problem-oriented work” (Saltmarsh, Hartley, & Clayton, 2009, p. 9). Both our own experience and the experience of other seasoned engagement practitioners (Kecskes, 2015) have shown that extended and flexible opportunities to enact such projects throughout a program increase the likelihood of mutually beneficial, sustainable outcomes.

The use of design thinking processes also proved valuable as a mechanism for extending community projects over the course of the nineteen months. As an iterative, project-based, and collaborative problem-solving process, design thinking begins with empathetic listening, observation, and immersion. The students then integrate those insights into brainstorming, prototyping, and testing (Fernaes & Lundstrom, 2015). While it shares practices with many other methodologies, in this

program we utilize design thinking to teach a process of collaborative problem solving that fosters the ideals of liberal education and leadership (Crouch & Pearce, 2012; Miller, 2015). The faculty engaged in the process especially value its emphasis on empathetic listening (imagining oneself in the place of the other), integration (connecting ideas and skills from across diverse perspectives), ideation (collective brainstorming), and action (Morris & Warman, 2015). As a pedagogy rooted in the complexities of each unique situation, it demands that instructors and students honor the context of the specific community in which the situation arose. By doing so we seek out spaces where nonacademic expertise is valued (in our example this meant local K–8 students, their parents, teachers, administrators, and neighborhood residents). We encourage students to move from consumers of information to producers and public actors, not just conducting research and presenting presentations or final papers but also generating community-specific projects designed to be shared with community partners.

By staging students' engaged work, design thinking has provided critical support over the course of the program, allowing students to integrate and apply both concepts and skills learned from each course into their engagement projects. For instance, the three general education courses required in the first semester of the program ask students to learn about but also enact the process, ultimately cycling students through its five stages (empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test) over the course of fifteen weeks. In the first course, *Reflect, Connect, and Engage: Introduction to Liberal Education (LIB 100)*, students harnessed the empathize and define stages of the design thinking process by touring the local elementary school and learning about its history as well as its mission, vision, and values firsthand. They then reflected on what they had learned, integrating their insights with research about liberal education. In the second five-week course, *Diversity in the U.S. (LIB 201)*, students conducted secondary research in order to better understand the complexities around creating a college-going culture (ideating and redefining the situation). Contextualizing their research, students next designed, facilitated, and analyzed dialogues with students, parents, and staff at the school (empathizing, integrating, and revising their understanding of the situation). In the third course, *Leadership for Social Change (LIB 341)*, students moved through the last three stages of the design thinking cycle—ideating, prototyping, and testing—by identifying root causes, researching additional contextual factors, and then prototyping interventions in and with the community. In *Team Building (MGT 345)*, the fourth course in the cohort series, students refined their ideas based on their previous testing with community members while honing their skills as members of diversified teams.

Because student teams were provided with more time to evolve their design thinking projects, students were able to take their projects further: testing their ideas in the community, refining their rough prototypes, and—in some

cases—implementing new programs and initiatives in partnership with the community. Although we incorporated design thinking in some of our courses early in the program, it was only in the fourth cohort that the faculty intentionally scaffolded the design thinking methods over multiple courses. The increase in the quality and sustainability of the community projects has been significant. For example, students have responded to issues of gentrification and exclusion in the neighborhood around the local school by supporting efforts under way to generate awareness of—and access to—local resources and programs. In collaboration with a neighborhood organization, one team created Housing Resource Kits, which document all available resources in English and Spanish. A separate team partnered with the urban school on a Walking School Bus program, while yet another created an initiative designed to provide motivational support for K–12 teachers at a local middle school.

Our experience has shown that the viability and sustainability of such projects require opportunities to continue them throughout the program. And while not every five-week course sets aside time and space to move students' community projects forward, a number of courses do, explicitly offering opportunities for students to meet course learning objectives through the extension of their community projects. For example, the dialogue course—scheduled midway through the program—provides students with opportunities to facilitate community-directed dialogues that can enhance or extend their project work. Similarly, the course on team building offers students the chance to design and enact collaborative processes through next-step project planning. In addition, students are provided with opportunities to extend their work through their internship and capstone requirements supervised by faculty. Hoping to generate a supportive and flexible model that best meets the needs of each student and course, students and faculty members have been encouraged to decide whether they should pursue new and different projects or continue project work begun in earlier courses. Also, the support of a committed faculty and staff adviser as well as the creation of a student-community liaison have helped students and faculty navigate such decisions. Despite the general assumptions around returning adult students, accelerated learning, and community engagement, this dimension of the program has—in our experience and according to students—been one of its most important and impactful components.

## **Lessons Learned: Student, Faculty, and Community Partner Perspectives**

This section explores the challenges and successes of the program from student, faculty, and community partner perspectives. Given the experimental and innovative nature of this program, we have continuously engaged in reflection

about best practices and the barriers students are facing. Faculty experiences, student learning, and community partner perspectives were elicited through multiple approaches. One of those approaches was an optional, informal pre- and postsurvey instrument delivered to students via SurveyMonkey. The survey included a request for limited demographic data and questions intended to capture students' changing perspectives on curriculum, the quality of instruction, program climate, and applied leadership. Administered during the first week of the program and again after students had completed their final course, the surveys included closed-ended, open-ended, and Likert-scaled questions, capturing students' changes in perspective over the course of the program. Students were invited to complete the optional survey via e-mail. To ensure that feedback did not negatively impact their work, final results were analyzed after students completed the program. The survey analysis focused on noting themes, preliminary statistics, and relevant pedagogical and learning implications.

Additional insights were captured via two supplementary approaches. Students provided program suggestions and other input via a student-led feedback collection process. The students cited here gave permission to share their conclusions via publication. We also derived insights from comparing the lived-experience observations of students, faculty, and community partners. The themes arising from these layered approaches were then triangulated through a review of students' final program e-portfolios, community partner feedback, comments from instructors in the program, and students' reviews of this article. Collectively, the captured insights drive our current conclusions, recommendations for going forward, and preliminary advice for other institutions.

### *Students*

Students' final projects, the optional program surveys, and faculty and community partner observations demonstrate that students felt not only that their leadership knowledge and abilities were enhanced over the course of the program (in the survey 78 percent strongly agreed) but also that they were able to put their leadership styles into practice, increasing their comfort level in taking on leadership roles in the workplace (from 70 percent pre- to 100 percent post-survey). Additionally, their confidence in their ability to positively affect their organization rose significantly (from 48 percent to 78 percent). They also noted that the program pushed them to become active learners, encouraging them to discuss how their own experiences related to the content of the courses. Furthermore, all students indicated that they understood the purpose of each course and the relationship between the face-to-face and online components

(a strong indication that the intensive planning processes implemented for the program were valuable). Students also reported that they came to recognize the critical importance of generating trust, working across differences, and leading by example in their leadership practices over the course of the nineteen months. These preliminary findings are very encouraging.

A student-generated report designed to identify cohort learning outcomes and offer program improvement recommendations highlighted the value of the design thinking process for fostering leadership and team-building skills, increasing opportunities for reflection, and creating positive mind-sets. Design thinking applications across multiple courses created a greater sense of empathy. Students reported that understanding others was a valuable ability to purposefully nurture. Prototype creation and testing further added to the skill set captured and exercised. Indeed, the self-reported outcomes closely match the learning goals identified in the program curricula plan. Additionally, students shared that their perspectives fairly consistently changed to a “do something mind-set” due to the program, attesting to the fact that they were taught in this program to take action. By combining all of these skills, the students felt equipped to take the initiative and make a difference in their organizations and communities.

Faculty review of the students’ e-portfolios and final reflective “Integrative Statements” provided evidence that students experienced enormous growth—personally, professionally, and intellectually. These assignments documented the impact of liberal education, integrative learning, and community engagement. They also demonstrated that students found skills developed through the program to be immediately useful in their careers. In general, these findings align with the research on the value of such high-impact learning practices. Indeed, research shows that these practices tend to foster empowerment and leadership, yield higher-quality student work, increase students’ ability to apply course material to the real world, and deepen students’ commitment to their community (Cooks, Scharrer, & Morgan, 2006). This model has also resulted in significantly higher retention rates than in the university-wide nontraditional student population. Within this program, the fall-to-fall retention rate is 84.6 percent (averaged over three cohorts), while the fall-to-fall retention rates for adult transfer students in the university is 65 percent (Center for Adult and Continuing Education, 2017).

Despite these successes, students faced many challenges within this accelerated program. We asked them to commit twenty hours a week to their coursework; most students were able to do so, but time management has been a recurring issue for everyone. Additional concerns about the quality of their work also meant that some students spent far more time on assignments than faculty expected or allotted. While some students had tuition reimbursement

through their employment, others encountered unexpected financial struggles. Although students often pointed to community engagement as one of the most valuable parts of their learning, particular aspects of it proved stressful. Work and family commitments as well as the limited hours of operation for most community organizations made scheduling and managing community projects challenging. However, students discovered that by relying on teamwork, they could relegate tasks based on individual schedules and make it work. Faculty had to be flexible as well.

### *Faculty*

We have identified a number of unique challenges in developing and implementing this curriculum. Indeed, the consistent nature of these challenges has been confirmed through informal feedback from faculty in the program, planning meetings, faculty and staff reviews of this article, and our own experiences as faculty teaching in the program.

To begin, the program combines the challenges of online and hybrid learning with accelerated education, in addition to the increased potential for challenges emerging from engaging with returning adult students and local community organizations. Some faculty members were initially skeptical, wondering how they would meet their course learning objectives, build in reflection-driven revision opportunities, and foster transformational learning in cohort students in just five weeks per course. As findings from student data and coursework results verified, these objectives can be—and were—met. We conclude that a number of key factors have been particularly critical to our success on this front, including (1) the peer curricular planning process, (2) cohort relationships, (3) community- and project-based learning opportunities, and (4) consistent contact with students through multiple venues (in class, discussion boards, prompt assignment feedback, e-mail communication, and weekly announcement updates).

The intensive nature of the program design phase presented faculty with challenges as well. Integrating the coursework from more than one department required a high level of communication between faculty members. Multiple coordination meetings took place, including hybrid course development training using Quality Matters standards (<http://www.qualitymatters.org>). Course design presented the new challenge of condensing existing courses into five weeks, converting them to a hybrid design, and customizing each course to the cohort themes in an integrated manner. Additionally, for some faculty, it was the first time they were teaching their respective course and implementing an accelerated format, working with returning adult students, integrating the design thinking model into a course, or employing community-based learning.

Through multiple drafts, peer reviews, and dedicated technical guidance, courses were sequenced following a cohort learning outcome map. In alignment with research findings on collaborative curriculum design processes, it has been our experience that the intensive and collaborative nature of the design and implementation phases strengthened faculty relationships (Cooks et al., 2006), deepening our commitment to students and the community (Mason & Davenport, 2006).

### *Community Partners*

The decision to start each cohort with a single “anchor” community organization as a partner and to provide flexible, scaffolded curricula provided students with opportunities to either extend and enhance their earlier projects or start new projects. The goal of this approach was to increase the possibility for alignment and mutual benefit between student and community interests. The branching out of community partners, topics, and issues over the course of students’ studies provided opportunities for them to pursue either narrow or broad areas of focus as well as long- or short-term projects. This flexible approach has led to a wide array of community projects addressing a range of place-based issues. For instance, one cohort—exploring themes around finding, developing, and retaining talent in the area—completed a wide array of projects. While some students worked with a local LGBT community center, others recruited people and materials in order to build a ramp for an elderly homebound community member, and yet another set of students implemented a team building project for a senior care center. True to the notion of authentic learning tasks/assessments, many students passionately exercise and realize their personal control of learning and the benefits thereof. On the other hand, the freedom and flexibility given to students to pursue the projects that most resonate for them has meant that key community partners may not benefit from or find merit in the student projects. This flexibility has also meant that some projects end prematurely, failing to yield sustained benefit. For instance, the mentoring program between a local college student group and the inner-city middle school ended soon after it began once the college student volunteers found themselves facing additional challenges due to travel, timing, and other schedule commitments. On the other hand, some projects continued over subsequent cohort courses, with new student groups picking them up. We have found that the opportunity to pick up and build upon earlier work increases the chances of yielding valuable community outcomes.

Community partners experienced challenges that reflect consistent findings within the national research on community engagement initiatives (Howe, Coleman, Hamshaw, & Westdijk, 2014; Kecskes, 2015). For example, challenges

around the availability of representatives to meet with students, changes in staffing, limited funding, and the timing of students' proposed projects were consistently noted. Informal conversations and community partner assessment surveys both indicated that community partners generally welcomed student projects, saying that they supported efforts to address their organizations' hurdles. In each case the partner was frank and realistic, which helped student teams empathize and understand the issues. Moving forward, it is our hope that the program will grow and thrive through its interdisciplinary and community-based collaborations.

## **Concluding Thoughts: Lingerin** Questions and Preliminary Recommendations

This project grew out of a desire to provide access for adult learners and began as a pilot, a prototype, hypothesizing that a continued commitment to liberal education under a different structure would be more relevant and accessible to adults. We are very much cognizant of the experimental nature of the program. We thus conclude by highlighting questions we are still grappling with and offering preliminary recommendations for others interested in pursuing a similar program.

Our experience has shown that focusing on the community as a site of learning and drawing on the student's own life experiences enabled them to learn and grow in ways they never expected. And while this article has not addressed all the challenges and rewards of learning in cohort groups, students reported that many of their gains came from working together in a cohort over those nineteen months. We have heard many of their professional success stories and, even more so, have seen and heard much about their personal growth.

Yet questions and challenges remain. Student final reports, surveys, and our experience as faculty in the program give us good indications that community engagement is messy and unpredictable. Our conclusions emerge from our own lived experience, and—given the size of the program at this stage—we do not seek to provide “conclusive evidence.” Indeed, as a narrative of our own experience and a single program, our conclusions cannot and should not be generalized. While this approach does not provide firm answers, it does raise critical questions and outline collaborative, reflective strategies for sustained engagement.

We are still learning and growing as a program. One recurring issue emerges from faculty workload commitments. Most of the faculty are full-time, meaning that they often teach two or three other semester-long courses at the same time as this intense accelerated course, and faculty have found that difficult.

As this is an interdisciplinary program, course requirements come from a variety of departments and colleges across the university. This dimension of



the program can be challenging administratively, since the priorities of other departments can shift in ways that affect course scheduling.

We continue to use and develop design thinking methodologies as ways students can approach problem solving in the community and as resources for their future career goals. However, this is an extra step of training for faculty, and not all of the faculty teaching in the program embrace the design thinking process. This is understandable given the types of coursework appropriate to different courses, but sometimes students are left with incomplete projects started earlier in the program.

Finally, we face challenges around recruitment, given that the benefits students gain from liberal education are not always immediately apparent to prospective students who have career-enhancement goals. We continue to iterate, listen carefully, redesign, and rethink together as a team of faculty and staff to improve the program.

Students appreciate the accelerated hybrid format but have suggested some program improvements we are currently exploring. They said that they could benefit from (1) receiving more information on the designated community partner earlier in the program, (2) more time in the ideation stage of their projects, (3) additional technology training, and (4) increased funding to cover appropriate expenses to develop community projects. Another suggestion was (5) to create a part-time position established by the university to help with starting, supporting, and coordinating relationships with various community partners. Last, (6) students suggested that a wider array of community partners willing to participate over the course of the program should be vetted in advance.

In response, we are now more directly emphasizing the community projects early in the advising process. To assist with community projects, the dean's office has established a \$2,000 fund that students can draw on for their projects. We also established an internship role staffed by an original cohort student that has been invaluable in efficiently facilitating community partner–student meetings and interactions. We hope to offer this internship to subsequent students for future cohorts.

We postulate that the value of this program lies along at least three dimensions: First, the community and project-based work has been the common thread linking students' intensive five-week courses together. The community work strengthens the student-to-student relationships in the cohort model, and the high levels of engagement empower students to act as leaders in the classroom and the community. Student-and-community-designed projects sustain collaborative learning opportunities that span the nineteen-month program.

Second, the focus on leadership in the community has been the ground-force by which various theories, skills, and tools are put to the test, moving students from a traditional focus on passively acquiring knowledge to

experientially creating and implementing knowledge with others. These projects open opportunities for leadership development—defined by students as “reflective and action-oriented” integrative thinking that fosters “the ability to transform, empower, and adapt.” As one student noted in the final survey instrument, “I have benefited more from community-engaged learning in this cohort than any other educational experience I have ever had.” This student went on to say, “I have a newfound sense of responsibility as a citizen of the . . . community.”

And third, design thinking has made program-wide opportunities to engage the surrounding community *integral* to the learning process, helping students integrate, ideate, and innovate across the artificial divides created by traditional university structures (such as disciplines, semesters, and courses). Echoing this sentiment, one of the alumni wrote that “without my experiences visiting the Literacy Center, Challenge Scholars Schools and the West Grand Neighborhood Organization, I might not have really understood that leadership comes from patience, understanding, dialogue, and walking with others.” While many students found the rigor of the Accelerated Leadership Program to be intense, they also found the real-world grounding of their coursework and the opportunity to apply it to be truly transformational. “For me,” one student wrote, “bearing witness to my community encouraged me to ask deeper questions. . . . Our classes have allowed me the freedom to ask questions of myself, my family, my community, my colleagues and especially my boss.”

These pedagogical strategies empower students to wrestle with the complexity of social issues not just by studying curricular content and skills but by putting them to use in collaboration with the surrounding community. Experiential learning works. As one student wrote: “Community engagement has made a tremendous difference in my learning experience. . . . The tools that I now possess in my educational toolbox have been sharpened. . . . It is real life experience.” Confirming the transformational impact of this work, an alumna said that she had originally thought that just getting her bachelor’s degree would be enough. Six months after graduating, however, she found that liberal education, through this program, “has left me with a need to give back, to use the degree I’ve achieved.”

General education programs have the opportunity to apply many of the curriculum strategies and insights, the design thinking model, and the community engagement practices outlined here. The findings over the past three years support the idea that added effort needs to be made to boldly experiment on behalf of all stakeholders. Partners in need exist in all communities. Nontraditional students provide mature minds and hearts to learn and apply such learning in practical and meaningful ways.

This program offers students the opportunity to influence local issues, address place-based needs, develop community partnerships, and establish

networks potentially valuable to their life after graduation. Engaged, project-based, intentionally scaffolded programs can be a factor in shifting the momentum around community issues. They also reframe the way students think about the purpose of education, coming to value themselves as potential change agents in their work and community lives.

### Appendix: Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Accelerated Leadership Program

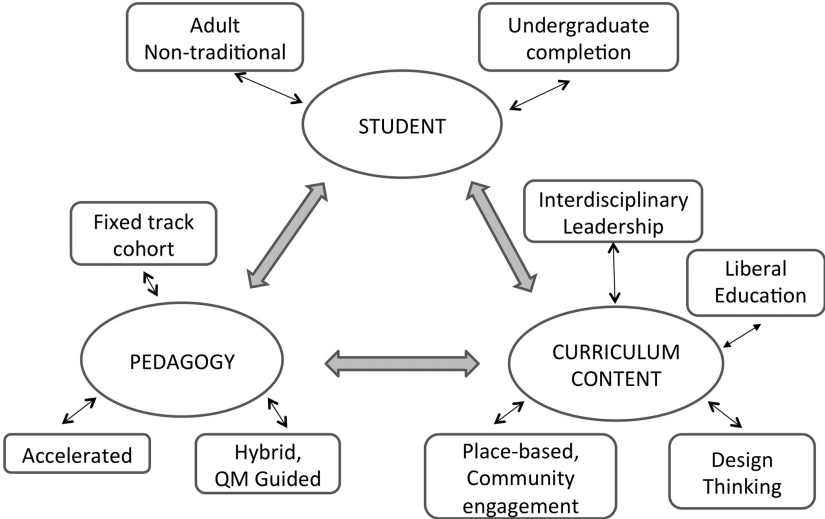


Figure 1 | GVSU's curriculum design model.

### Acknowledgments

The success of this program is due to the hard work of many people, primarily Simone Jonaitis, executive director, and Kate VanDerKolk, student service coordinator, as well as Lisa Miller, in the Center for Adult and Continuing Studies. The creative support of Glenna Decker, instructional designer, has been essential to the curriculum and the preparation of faculty to teach in the program. Student Julie Keller was invaluable as the community liaison for two cohorts. Community partner Gwen Heatley at Harrison Park School was always there for our students. Director of Community Engagement Ruth Stegeman was critical for establishing the initial partnerships from which students' community-based projects emerged. Faculty in Liberal Studies, Management,

and Public Administration have contributed many hours and resources to the design of the curriculum and the achievements of the students.

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