



Los Angeles County
Workforce Development, Aging, and
Community Services Department
Commission on Human Relations
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*Working to transform prejudice into acceptance,
inequity into justice, and hostility into peace*

WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP PROJECT

The Women's Leadership Project (WLP) was created by staff of the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations. For more than 70 years, the Commission has endeavored to help people replace prejudice and fear with respect and trust. We work to help people see the need for justice, adopt attitudes of mutual acceptance, and learn the art and science of collaborative relationship.

Challenge

Young women of color are challenged by urgent social, educational, and emotional risk factors. Nationwide, sexual assault rates for female victims between the ages of 12 and 19 were more than double that of those 25 and older. According to the Centers for Disease Control and the National Institutes of Health women of color are more likely to experience sexual assault than are white women. Young women in abusive relationships were also more likely to attempt suicide, have unplanned pregnancies, contract STDs and STIs and develop risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse. According to a 2008 report by the Women's Foundation of California, these risk factors are reinforced by mainstream media portrayals of young women of color as sex objects and a culture of hyper-masculinity amongst young men. Moreover, in school cultures with high drop-out rates, inadequate college preparation and low four year college going rates, students are not actively encouraged to excel academically.

Solution

According to the Women's Foundation of California, low income girls of color who receive active gender-focused mentoring, counseling, and reinforcement on life opportunities that extend beyond mainstream stereotypes of early pregnancy and co-dependent relationships with men are more likely to attend college and pursue professional careers. Both the Education Trust and UCLA's Graduate School of Education and Information Sciences have concluded that curricula, pedagogy, and classroom management methodology that are tied to the specific cultural context of diverse students have been shown to improve the academic achievement gap that exists between students of color and white students. Youth that have a sense of connection to and agency within their school-communities consistently perform better than youth who feel isolated from and disrespected by school administration and faculty. By allowing students to identify projects that they care about with advisement from adult mentors, teachers, and community members, students are best able to navigate the complex terrain of promoting change in their school communities and thriving academically.

WLP integrates these crucial components in a service learning program facilitated by trained adult mentors and designed to address the distinctive challenges facing young women of color by educating and training them to take ownership of their school-communities.

Purposes

Using a humanist curriculum with a social justice lens, WLP empowers young women of color to develop their own voices, increase their self-esteem, foster healthy relationships, promote critical consciousness about and activism around race, gender, and LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning) equality, and prepare for college and careers. WLP guides young women through school-community advocacy projects of their own choosing, toward helping them develop and sharpen their critical thinking, writing, collaboration, and leadership skills. Focusing on students' lived experiences, language capacities, community contexts, and cultural knowledge the program builds on their native strengths, skill sets, and cultural capital to provide them with a foundation for developing healthy relationships and spearheading projects within the school-community.

Core Features

The Women's Leadership Project program emphasizes culturally relevant and culturally responsive teaching, outreach, and leadership development strategies that have been shown to facilitate learning among diverse student populations. In addition to its emphasis on a woman of color-centered curriculum, WLP also promotes collaboration with and training of young men on healthy non-violent models of masculinity, sexuality, and male-female relationships.

Campus-based activity includes:

- Weekly student gatherings during lunch and after school
- Peer education trainings
- College access mentoring (including financial aid/scholarship resource assistance)
- Women of Color Speaker Series
- WLP Alumni College Panel
- Women of Color in the U.S. class

Students receive service learning credit for their participation. As part of their core instruction they participate in expository writing exercises, group dialogue, media analysis, and peer education training. Students also develop and present at an annual end of the year conference on youth leadership, health literacy, media literacy, feminism, and promoting positive intergroup relations across race, gender, and sexual orientation.

Making a Difference

WLP's four-year college going rate for graduating seniors is significantly above that of the general population of its home schools. WLP students have been awarded prestigious scholarships from organizations such as the Posse Foundation, Horatio Alger Foundation, the Wells Fargo Foundation and the Los Angeles Urban Policy Roundtable. WLP partner and supporting community organizations include REACH L.A., the Women's Foundation of California, the Ida B. Wells Institute, Secular Women, Black Women for Wellness, Peace Over Violence, Planned Parenthood Los Angeles, and the Los Angeles Urban Policy Roundtable.