

Learning for the Common Good: A Diverse Community Lives and Learns Together in the Michigan Community Scholars Program

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A Portrait of Two College Students

April and Lauren¹ are first-year students enrolled in the Michigan Community Scholars Program at the University of Michigan. April is an African American student from the city of Detroit. Lauren is a White student from the northern suburbs of Chicago. To many people, these few descriptors might be sufficient to suggest detailed assumptions about April and Lauren's life stories, their values and experiences, interests and dreams, histories and futures. However, this story is actually one that would confound such assumptions. And their story is significant, because who they are and how they become known to one another through their involvement in the Michigan Community Scholars Program offers important insights about one residential learning community that emphasizes community service-learning and intergroup dialogue. Their story is, in fact, the story of a new community and of young adults who take seriously the ideals of building a diverse, just, and strong democratic America.

April and Lauren are both very bright individuals who were excellent students in high school and achieved strong enough academic records to gain admission to a flagship public university, the University of Michigan. Both carried a 3.8 grade point average in their academic subjects. April's school offered only the AP U.S. History course and she scored a 4 in that AP exam. Lauren took three AP courses with scores ranging from 3 to 5. At graduation, April received her high school award for Best Science Student. Lauren was a National Merit Semi-Finalist. April and Lauren were both ranked in the top 10 percent of their classes.

Both women share a commitment to community service and participated in many community service projects before coming to college. April was president of her church outreach organization, where she helped to coordinate an elementary-school tutoring program and a project for young people to visit homebound seniors. Through her high school, April participated in the student council's "Clean the River" outing, and each semester helped to build a home for Habitat for Humanity. Lauren was vice president of the National Honor Society in her high school and was responsible for coordinating community service projects for the seventy-five students in that organization. Each week she herself volunteered at the local hospital in the unit for children with cancer. She also organized a 10K fund-raising run for AIDS research. In her senior year, she and other students participated monthly in a weekend tutoring program for city kids in Chicago.

April and Lauren are both friendly, make friends easily, and take on leadership roles. April appears somewhat reserved upon first meeting her, but around those who know her well she is quite outgoing and gregarious. Lauren meets people with a big smile and handshake but very much enjoys her privacy and quiet, contemplative time. In addition to her leadership role at church, April was

The Michigan Community Scholars Program (MCSP) is a residential learning community at the University of Michigan (UM) whose students "make a difference." It has as its focus: (1) intellectual exploration and engagement, (2) democratic practice through community involvement, (3) the building of a diverse, model community, and (4) student leadership and academic success. As a living-learning program, MCSP provides a unique opportunity for students to put into practice their values and ideals about community, personal and social responsibility, the linkage of arts and civic engagement, intergroup relations, social change, and social justice in a diverse, democratic society.

The Michigan Community Scholars Program was founded in fall 1999 and is one of several learning communities at the University of Michigan. MCSP enrolls about 150 to 200 first- and second-year students each year in an overall UM undergraduate population of about 23,000. Each year fifteen faculty teach first-year seminars, community service-learning classes, composition, and other courses, all of which are held in the residence hall. Ten community partners, who either assist faculty in the classroom or who represent agencies where MCSP students provide community service, meet with the faculty and MCSP staff in a monthly MCSP faculty/community partners seminar.

All MCSP students are required to enroll in an MCSP First-Year Seminar, a one-credit course, "The Student in the University," and a community service-learning or intergroup dialogue course. MCSP courses give students an opportunity to think deeply about the meaning of community from various academic disciplines, and to gain an intellectual grounding in some of the current discussions about community. MCSP students are active participants in the community through coursework and volunteer projects. MCSP offers students opportunities for long-term involvement and one-time events, all with time built in for preparation before entering into a community, and for reflection afterwards about the experience through discussions and papers.

MCSP believes in its students and encourages student leadership and initiative. Students are responsible for governance of the MCSP Programming Board, serve as Resident Advisors, Peer Advisors, and Peer Mentors, and help facilitate sections of the one-credit required course, community service-learning courses, and intergroup dialogue courses. David Schoem is the faculty director of the Michigan Community Scholars Program. Penny A. Pasque is the program director of the Michigan Community Scholars Program. Together they co-direct the Michigan Community Scholars Program.

treasurer of the student council, a member of the Key Club, and ran on the cross-country team. Lauren devoted most of her leadership efforts to the National Honor Society, but she also was a photographer for the high school yearbook, and played field hockey and basketball.

April and Lauren both lived in neighborhoods and attended schools that were racially segregated. April's neighborhood was 90 percent African American. Her high school was 98 percent African American. Lauren's neighborhood was 97 percent White, as was her high school. Neither April nor Lauren, respectively, knew White or African American peers beyond an occasional acquaintance. April had a few White teachers and Lauren one African American and one Hispanic teacher during their school years. Their primary, and still very limited, contact with people from racial and economic backgrounds different from their own was through their community service work.

In contrast to these many similarities, April and Lauren came to Michigan with two differences. One was their racial background and the other was their economic background. April came from a lower middle-class background, so that she was eligible for a significant financial aid package and needed to work approximately twenty hours per week during the college year. In the summer before attending the University of Michigan, April worked forty-plus hours for an auto company to earn money for tuition. Lauren came from an upper-class background. Her parents were paying the full cost of out-of-state tuition at Michigan, and Lauren had no need to work during the college year. She spent the summer prior to college traveling and working at a summer day-camp.

Preparing Students for a Diverse Democracy

Community and "making a difference" are at the core of the Michigan Community Scholars Program (MCSP)². First, students gain an intellectual understanding of community through First-Year Seminars offered through a variety of disciplines. The seminars are on topics such as "Environment, Sustainability, and Social Change," "Documentary Film and Community Cultures," "Schools, Community, and Power," "Democracy, Diversity, and Community," "Arts in the Community," "The Local and Global in the African American Search for Community," and "Virtual Community: Exploring Home, Identity, and Place." Second, all MCSP first-year students take a required one-credit course, which focuses on issues such as community service-learning and identity. Third, students go out into the community through community service-learning courses and volunteer service projects. Through these courses, students participate in projects such as coordinating high school tutoring for the public schools, environmental sustainability in local woodlands and watersheds, HIV/AIDS educational outreach, arts projects in the community, community economic development, hospital patient care, etc. Finally, because students live together on common floors of a residence hall in this living-learning program, students are encouraged to model in their daily lives the experience and challenges of living in a diverse democracy. They are required to think through and act on issues of balancing individual rights and responsibilities to the group, managing issues of social justice, intergroup conflict, decision-making, budgeting and planning for a

variety of programs, and establishing group norms for behavior.

A typical MCSP student will spend four to six hours weekly in a community service-learning placement that is part of a course, a half or full day in a one-time project associated with MCSP's required one-credit courses, and then additional hours in ongoing and one-time community projects throughout the academic year. A small number of students spend ten to twelve hours weekly if they participate in MCSP's spring internship course. All students spend additional time in classroom discussion and reflection about their service-learning experience, do considerable reading on the topic, and write papers and journals on their experience.

Each year, there are about ten members from the community who serve as community partners, an important feature of the program. Five of the community partners are people whom individual faculty have invited into their classrooms to assist in teaching their first-year seminars. The other five are representatives from community agencies who work closely with our students and our program. It is the philosophy of the program that bringing the experience of community partners into the classroom and the program helps ground the faculty's scholarly understanding of community issues. Faculty and the community partners meet on a monthly basis for a seminar to talk about approaches to teaching about community, working in the community, creating change in the community and the university, and furthering the goals of the Michigan Community Scholars Program.

MCSP offers students a variety of academic support services to provide a safety net for the purposes of student retention and academic success. It has an academic advisor linked to the program, provides tutoring and study groups as needed, offers workshops on topics such as study skills and time management, requires students to meet faculty during office hours in the first weeks of the semester, and effectively uses the informal communication network of the living learning program to identify students who may be at risk, socially or academically. In addition, the program attempts to provide the comprehensive range of college offerings identified in the research that are significant factors in student academic success, such as first-year seminars, close faculty-student contact, a living-learning program, a "University 101"-type transition course, study groups, and engagement with the university through community service-learning.

MCSP has attracted a student body that is comprised of approximately 50 percent Students of Color and 50 percent White students. The program focuses on issues of social identity and helps students explore their own social identities in terms of race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religion, gender, ability, etc. Students are encouraged in and out of the classroom to become comfortable with students with social identities that are different from their own. MCSP addresses these issues through its "University 101"-type course and First-Year Seminars, and it works together with the Program on Intergroup Relations, Conflict, and Community to offer intergroup dialogue courses that provide intense engagement around these issues.

Intergroup dialogues are "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." (Schoem and Hurtado 2001, 6)³. Intergroup dialogues are being used increasingly across the country in K-12,

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colleges and professional schools, community organizations and local governments, and in the corporate sector to confront the historical legacies of the social divisions of our country and to move forward to achieve the ideals of liberty and justice for all. It is a difficult and intense process, but it is often a transformative one, involving facilitated discussions of students over a period of a full semester that helps them learn the skills to bridge social difference in order to learn how to build a strong, just, and diverse democracy.

Faculty are attracted to teaching in MCSP because of the program's focus on community, the opportunity to collaborate with their peers across disciplines, the chance to work with community partners and, importantly, because of the opportunity to teach in a classroom with the unique racial diversity of MCSP students. For many faculty, MCSP precisely represents the kind of scholarly community that they have long desired in their academic lives. It is one that encourages student-faculty contact, embraces diversity, is interdisciplinary and intellectually vibrant, empowers their intellectual and civic-minded focus on community, and welcomes and supports their personal, social, and intellectual lives and interests.

Students have numerous opportunities for leadership in the MCSP community. Students control the board, budget, and decision-making process for the MCSP Programming Board, which sponsors educational, community service, arts, and social activities for students in the program. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors may serve as Resident Advisors, Peer Advisors, or Peer Mentors in the program. Students also facilitate classroom discussions in the required one-credit MCSP course, the community service-learning courses, and the intergroup dialogues, which add to the various leadership opportunities. Many MCSP students assume leadership roles in a variety of campus-wide organizations and in their home communities.

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One Year Later: Emerging Scholars Engaged in Civic Life

After spending one year in college with the Michigan Community Scholars Program, April and Lauren look back on their first-year experience in college. April has taken courses that will lead to a career in science or medicine. She has served as vice president of the student-run programming board, actively participated in the multicultural hall council, organized an after-school tutoring program staffed by MCSP students at a nearby elementary school, and participated in

numerous volunteer service projects. She also has been asked to facilitate a discussion section in the coming year in MCSP's community service-learning course. April also has worked this year as a research assistant in a professor's lab and as a student assistant in the MCSP office. She has remained on campus for the summer, taking courses and working full-time.

Lauren has taken a set of courses to help her explore a wide range of interests that at this point seem to focus primarily on teaching and sociology. She was selected as one of only two first-year students to be trained to be a facilitator for an intergroup dialogue course, which she will do when she returns for her sophomore year. She and a small group of students in MCSP were present at numerous workshops with faculty and students focusing on pressing social issues, and she participated in various election activities from voter registration to MTV-sponsored election programs on campus. Lauren returned home for the summer and is an intern working with middle school students in the Chicago public schools.

April and Lauren lived across the hall from one another in the residence hall where MCSP is located. They were never best friends in the "buddy" sense of the term, but they saw one another every day and respected each other. They greeted each other in the morning in the common dining hall before getting ready to go to class. They were enrolled in the same First-Year Seminar and listened closely and responded to one another's comments in class discussions. Their best discussions about course topics, life experiences, dreams, and issues of community took place late at night, sitting out in the hallway between their rooms eating pizza with the diverse group of MCSP students who lived in the surrounding rooms. In the dining hall, while they sat with different groups, they always acknowledged one another and often joked about the antics of Wednesday night's popular TV sitcom. Lauren participated in many of the programs that April organized as part of the programming board, and she persuaded April to enroll in an intergroup dialogue course next fall.

In one poignant moment during the semester, a conflict between a White student and a student of color on their floor, over consistent loud noise throughout the corridors in the middle of the night, appeared to have the potential of developing into a racial issue. It is certainly the case that disputes in residence halls over music and noise between members of different racial groups often represent underlying and deeper issues of racial difference and conflict. In this case, however, the issue was about respect, responsibility, and justice in a community living environment. As more and more students entered into the escalating conflict between the two students, including shouting matches and personal items being broken, it was April and Lauren who stood together as a force of understanding and strength in the matter. They spoke openly about possible interpretations of the problem at hand, and addressed directly and publicly in MCSP meetings the fact that in this particular case the issues did not involve broader social or racial differences. In addition, they each helped their neighbors work through what were clearly personality differences, college adjustment issues, and a case of putting one's self interests first, rather than considering one's self within the context of community interests.

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in common and yet had lived their lives so far apart, had reached a point where they could fairly easily come together with trust and shared insight to lead the wider group in a constructive direction. They very clearly recognized the importance of race in all levels of issues in American society today and knew that MCSP strongly encouraged open discussion of issues of race. Yet they knew clearly that race was not at the center of this particular conflict, and they prevented the residents of their floor from dividing along racial lines. In this instance, they had crossed the boundary that had so dramatically divided their lives until entering college and had taken a significant leap forward toward building the strong, diverse, and just democracy that they had always been taught to be the ideal of the United States. Other MCSP students, too, had learned from the conflict, its resolution, and April and Lauren's leadership. This situation brought this diverse community together, stronger, wiser, and even more committed to the ideals and hard work required to bring about the change needed to help build a just, diverse society.

Final Observations

As we reflect back on this story together and with students, we cannot say for certain what made the difference in this case as compared to other student relationships and conflicts across race that are present every day on our campuses and in society. However, we do see stories like April and Lauren's often repeated in this way in the Michigan Community Scholars Program, and we much less frequently see it happen elsewhere in higher education. We have come to believe that when a program has the intersecting elements of a learning community, service-learning, and intergroup dialogue, students are much better able and prepared to communicate across differences and model the values of a diverse democratic society.

In the Michigan Community Scholars Program, students such as April and Lauren were able to find a learning environment that supports their desire to experience and realize the ideals of the United States. We interpret their story as one of community, commonality, respect for diversity, and collaboration in a society that too often teaches us to see only difference and conflict, and to view both of those in a most negative and destructive light. April and Lauren study and work together in a scholarly community in which learning comes to life twenty-four hours a day in the more formal classroom setting, in a wide range of community service locations, and in the corridors of their university residence hall.

Notes

1. The descriptions and experiences of April and Lauren are composites developed from actual students and experiences in the Michigan Community Scholars Program.
2. For more information on the Michigan Community Scholars Program, visit the website at www.sa.umich.edu/mcs or write to MCSP, University of Michigan, 1200 E. Ann Street, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2025.
3. For more information on intergroup dialogue, see: Schoem, David, and Sylvia Hurtado. 2001. *Intergroup Dialogue: Deliberative Democracy in School, College, Community and Workplace*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.