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Women & Kids Learning Together Summer Camp:
an Intensive Learning Experience for Students and Participants

by Mary Ann Bokkon, Michelle Glorioso, and Jane Olmsted

Introduction and Background

The Women and Kids Learning Together Summer Camp is a multi-faceted project designed to provide both university students and the Camp participants (low income Kentucky women and their children) an intensive learning experience. Western Kentucky University students served as counselors for the children's and women's portions of the camp, working 40-50 hours during the week. They also helped with the planning, and were required to attend at least two meetings before the camp began. Their final task was to write a 5-page reflection on the experience. They had three options for receiving academic credit: a two-hour internship credit, a \$200 tuition scholarship, or a \$200 book scholarship.

The Camp took place on Western's campus for one week, from 8:00am-4:00pm, in early June, with a graduation ceremony Friday evening. The greatest need for low-income women, we were told by everyone we consulted, was enhanced self-esteem and personal empowerment. In order to give the Camp its structure and to heed the advice we were given, we decided on three "threads" to unite the activities: arts and education, wellness, and "practical" issues. Women and their children attended two "camps," which included workshops on photography, poetry, theater, dance, cooking, painting, and beading among other activities that encourage creativity and self-expression. The camp also provided workshops on self-defense, finance, fitness, and financial aid. One day, the women went to a Retreat Center to take part in ropes courses and team building exercises designed to encourage cooperation and self-empowerment.

The Women's Studies Program decided to sponsor the camp as a project of the Community Outreach and Service Committee (about 8-10 members, including students, from

across the campus). Citing the Governor's Task Force (2003) on the Economic Status of Kentucky Women, which found that Kentucky ranks 47th in women's economic and social autonomy, we sought funding from a number of grant-giving agencies and local businesses. Our press release, which appeared a few weeks before the camp, noted that Kentucky also ranks 49th in the percentage of women with four or more years of college, and 50th in health and well-being of its women. These are staggering statistics, and our Camp drew local attention to them, inspiring a local news station to run a three-part series on Kentucky women, two months later.

Although Women's Studies at Western has always addressed class issues in its courses, this camp represents the first major venture into linking research and service. Many women in our area of the state desperately need assistance and encouragement. The camp, which we plan on holding every summer, represents one way to create positive social change so that statistics like these—and the real lives of women—can begin to improve. Just as important is the opportunity the Camp provides our students, who received an intense and ultimately rewarding service learning experience that helped them make the link between theory and activism.

Three issues that emerged as we began planning the Camp were 1) which women could attend a camp that met during working hours; 2) how would they get to the Camp; and 3) what would they do with their children? For us, these potential problems were solved by partnering with the Housing Authority of Bowling Green, which sponsors a welfare-to-work program called Reach Higher. Such linking is crucial, especially when a university-sponsored project both serves the larger community and relies on it for the project's success. The first issue was solved when the director of Reach Higher was able to send her participants to the camp rather than to their job placements, without interrupting their weekly pay. The second, transportation, was also solved with the use of the Housing Authority vans. Finally, the problem of child care could not be solved without including a children's portion of the Camp, though only for children ages 6-

14. By including the Reach Higher participants as a core group, we achieved an important connection with the community. Since every university setting is unique, solutions will likely vary, but we are convinced that working with existing community organizations is essential.

The process

The first six months. We began planning our Summer Camp about a year in advance. Initially, we thought it would be a modified version of the very successful New Opportunity School for Women, which was founded by Jane Stephenson in Berea, Kentucky. Serving Appalachian women, the NOSW is a three-week intensive residential camp that includes workshops, internships with local businesses, and cultural events. Unlike the NOSW program, which is not service learning, our Camp needed to connect what we do in class with what's going on in our community. In the early stages of planning, we found inspiration in Jane Addams' autobiographical *Twenty Years at Hull House*, which is required reading in the graduate course, Feminist Knowledge and Social Change. The blend of cultural and practical education taught during the settlement house movement, often referred to as "bread and roses," offered a metaphor for solving the perceived split between welfare-to-work programs and liberal arts—too much bread there, too many roses here. As a popular song from the women's garment workers unionization movement and written by James Oppenheim goes, "Hearts starve as well as bodies; give us bread but give us roses!"

A major effort of the first six months was grant-writing and approaching local businesses for support. After a few funding disappointments, we realized that a residential camp was over our heads, and we turned to thinking about a day camp. Once we realized that the most we could handle was a week-long day camp, we also dropped the idea of internships. The camp was becoming our own. In the end, underwriting came from two corporations (Dollar General and

Fort Campbell Credit Union), an individual, the Provost's fund for student-centered activities, and the Kentucky Foundation for Women (a grant-giving organization that supports feminist art and social change projects). All the non-university funding sources came late in the process, and for several months we proceeded with a "let's keep hoping" attitude, paired with a realistic "it might not happen this year." Once we had promises for \$8,000, we committed to the camp. The idea was compelling enough that we ended up with more than we needed, thus creating seed money for next year.

The last four months. We were fortunate to receive university funding for an additional student worker, who started in January and continued our fund-raising efforts (which took about nine months), and also approached area restaurants to sponsor lunches for the participants. In April, we began meeting every week, alternating the kids' and women's planning groups. Terrific volunteers stepped forward with creative ideas that eventually led to a schedule that was diverse with activities addressing our three threads—arts and education; wellness; "practical" matters. In addition to the idea of using the arts to encourage self-esteem and empowerment, we emphasized the need for workshops filled with activities, and classes that minimized passive learning. We added field trips for both camps (ropes course for the women, junior cooking school for the children), and we approached a woman from Berea who leads beading workshops around the world (including for the New Opportunity School for Women). Her beading workshop turned out to be the emotional peak of the camp experience, as women "told their stories on a necklace." Enthusiastic students, eager to be in charge of portions of the camp, made the whole planning process a lot of fun and inspiring, too.

Working with the Community

We worked with community partners in our college town of over 50,000 to find applicants for the program and sought ideas from a focus group of Reach Higher mothers. Working together in committee, we wrote an information sheet/application and the two undergraduate student workers delivered 200 copies to local social service agencies (Department for Community Based Services, Community Action, the Salvation Army, the food stamp office, churches and public schools, some laundromats, and a mental health counseling agency) in mid-April. The application stated a deadline of May 5th. In retrospect, we should have foregone the deadline, since we ended up taking participants up to the Friday before the camp started. Although time-consuming, actually meeting with social service workers and community leaders would have helped us reach potential campers. Now that our Camp has been publicized, we expect next year's application process to be easier.

We credit our partnership with Reach Higher for the success of the Camp. Our women's camp coordinator, a graduate student who had prior connections with them, was key to establishing the link between us. She had worked (through another agency) for the previous 18 months with Reach Higher, building trust and productive relationships with the staff at the Housing Authority of Bowling Green and the Reach Higher participants. The day the applications were printed, 11 Reach Higher participants completed and returned their applications. Response from the community at large, however, was more sluggish. By the week before camp, 5 applications had come in from non-Reach Higher participants. While all were accepted to the camp, only 3 actually attended. About half of all the participants were white and the other half African American.

The women (and one man) who participated in Reach Higher during the spring of 2006 also served as a focus group in the early planning stages of the camp. We gave them a brief

questionnaire with space for them to include their own thoughts. Their answers were similar to what we expected: They wanted to learn about how to increase their own self-esteem and the self-esteem of their kids; they wanted to spend time and have fun with their kids; childcare, transportation, and wages lost from work were perceived as major barriers; they were interested in yoga, home ownership, car repair, nutritious budget cooking, parent/child activities, and music; and the last things they wanted were lectures, advice from "someone who does not understand where we are or what we need," or to learn more low-wage job skills.

We took their requests and concerns under advisement. The Reach Higher director was able to categorize the camp as a week of "mandatory life skills training" which meant Reach Higher participants could be pulled from their regular work sites and still receive their week's wages (32 hours at \$5.15 per hour). We searched among our campus and community partners for free or inexpensive activities that met our three-thread criteria of arts/education, wellness, or practical living. A final draft of our activities honored several of the focus group's requests, including classes on yoga, outdoor activities, self-defense, and live music. We brought in lunchtime speakers who could speak to "where we are and what we need" from personal experience—a group of racially diverse, intelligent, and talented local women who had all worked their way up from poverty to become university professors, directors of grant-funded programs, and published authors. These “inspirational” lunchtime talks proved very powerful.

Many artists and business people in our community generously donated their time, talents, food, and art supplies. Several professional women donated clothing and shoes for a clothes bank (open to the women on the last day, just before graduation)—and hair dressers donated cuts and styles to those women who wanted them (and most of them did). A wonderful workshop on protecting our children and ourselves from sexual predators was led by a coalition of the community rape crisis and prevention center and WKU's Police Department and

Counseling Center. A painting professor and professor of women's poetry led creative workshops. Our mayor, a woman, led a discussion on civic engagement. Several locally owned restaurants donated food, some of it gourmet. A photojournalism professor with a keen interest in women's lives documented the entire week on film.

Theory to Practice: Middle Class Students Encounter Low Income Families

The students who volunteered to be counselors came from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, though only one was African American (the others were white), and one was male. Many of the student counselors had encountered theory about socioeconomic status and poverty in America in their general education sociology courses, but had neither experienced living in poverty nor had they previously engaged in a meaningful way with people from other socioeconomic classes. To be blunt, some of them were afraid of the adult participants, whether they were white or black. While there was some discomfort along the way, most students reported that working for the camp was eye-opening, challenging, and inspiring. One student counselor wrote in her journal, "The white, middle class bubble that I am used to was promptly popped at the beginning of camp, and it was a great experience for me. I learned to love and tolerate some of the kids who were a little more unruly and with whom I did not 'click' so quickly, and I gained appreciation and hope for the future in the kids who were mature beyond their years."

The kids' camp coordinator, a graduate student with years of experience working with Gifted Studies camps, assumed that our children would, like the ones she was used to, tell her about any food allergies. The first day of our camp, one of the children with a red dye allergy sneaked aside to drink as much as she could of some red punch, and promptly threw it all up. Another difference, perhaps due to class—or just a childish impulse to seize the moment.

All but one of the 8 students who served as counselors worked with the kids' camp (the remaining 3 students served as camp coordinators). It is interesting that the only counselor who was drawn to working with the women was herself a mother and a non-traditional student. Although she didn't identify the camp participant, she said she had known one of them before the camp experience, and that in the "old days" they had been equals. Meeting her in these new circumstances caused her to relive some painful memories, a period in her life that she had been trying to forget. Going into the camp, she had assumed that her role would be as mentor, but by the end she was surprised to discover how much they had given her. In her reflection, she wrote:

I went into this camp with high expectations of myself. I hoped to be an example for these women. To show them what they could do and become if they just tried hard enough. I think somewhere along the way I realized that inside some of these women are a woman I could never aspire to be. I thought about the broken bead I had put on my necklace. It was my favorite bead simply because it was broken, but still usable. I think that bead, like those women, was the most beautiful part of my story.

Student Focus/Learning Issues

In planning the camp we looked for ways to involve WKU students in every step. In our application for university support, we defined our outcomes as follows:

- empowerment as students gain confidence as role models for the children;
- experience with the broader community;
- learning to plan and execute a major project;
- learning to interact in committees; and
- learning to share ideas, receive criticism, and reflect on the process.

We believed the camp would give students an opportunity to gain real life experience with the issues they had read about and discussed in classes. We hoped that practical, hands-on application would allow students to enact leadership qualities that too often remain theoretical

and, by and large, our outcomes were fully realized. In the reflective essays that student counselors were required to write, two major themes emerged: students' expanded confidence in their leadership skills and a deepened cultural awareness of their community.

Students were surprised at the confidence they gained in their leadership skills through the week. Essays expressed counselors' initial fears, sometimes with humorous exaggeration, for instance, of negatively affecting the "fragile minds of children," and went on to show how their fear gave way to their successes in serving as role models. When age differences in the kids' camp caused disruptions and behavioral problems, counselors instituted a "peer-mentoring" system, which invited older children to explore leadership roles by taking on the responsibility of aiding younger children. Counselors reported that this eased a lot of the tension and helped them reach out to the children in more meaningful ways. Regarding how they learned to handle behavior problems, another student wrote: "I think this stretched us all, the way repeated exercise stretches a muscle which then grows back stronger. Towards the end of the camp I finally felt as if I were beginning to establish a connection with the more distanced kids; and I felt as if I were able to teach them something."

Another counselor talked about how they grew more assertive and gained confidence in themselves as authority figures:

At the beginning of the week to discipline a child not staying with their counselor, we [the counselors] would say in our sweetest voice, "Now, now we need to stay near me because I don't want you to get hurt, you might fall down and get a boo-boo." And by the end of the week we were sternly saying, "You WILL stay beside me and keep up with the group, or you will have to hold hands with each other even if you are 14 years old! Do you understand?" I felt like I needed 6 more arms to get the job done!

The second theme, deepened cultural awareness, emerged in myriad epiphanies, situations, and reflections. One counselor's experience seemed to epitomize how students applied classroom-learned principles of diversity education to hands-on practice. Towards the end of the week, a white girl called a group of African American girls by "the N word" and their counselor took the girls aside and discussed the incident and the girls' choice of words. When the white girl explained that she'd heard the African American girls call each other by "that word," the counselor took the opportunity to teach all the girls involved about the cultural context of the language. She wrote, "The conversation ended in a formal apology from white girl to the other girls for the offensive thing she had said. I also asked the other girls to express how that word made them feel. Discussion and the apology were necessary for her to understand the impact of words."

The reflection papers show how the students drew from what they already "knew" about class and race oppression. One said, "At least I made a point to say 'please' and 'thank you' to each one of them and treat them like people rather than inmates. It was easy for me to keep in mind that I too was once small and wedged into awkward social situations (summer camps) while my mother was busy elsewhere during the summer daylight hours." Is this student already "seeing" the black child as a convict? Recognizing the appalling truth about rates of incarceration? The second sentence suggests both an ability to empathize with being young and powerless and a desire to transcend his own privilege. As Peggy McIntosh wrote in her famous essay, "White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack":

I want, then, to distinguish between earned strength and unearned power[;] conferred privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate. But not all of the privileges on my list are inevitably damaging. Some, like the expectation that neighbors will be decent to you, or that your race will not count against

you in court, should be the norm in a just society. Others, like the privilege to ignore less powerful people, distort the humanity of the holders as well as the ignored groups.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The test of any attempt to do good works is, did it make any net, positive difference in the lives of those involved? As of this writing, three of the fourteen women are enrolled in post-secondary education for the fall 2006 term. One of them, inspired by the impact of the photographic images of the camp, wants to study photojournalism. Two more have called to schedule their GED exams for this fall.

Those of us in the university, whether we come from lower or middle-class backgrounds, enjoyed some of the unexpected cultural collisions that emerged during the week. Even something so seemingly innocuous as food revealed class divisions. Our breakfast menu of freshly baked muffins from a local, woman-owned bagel shop met with derision (except for the blueberry muffins). “Don’t bring us those old hard things,” one said about Pepperidge Farm mini bagels, and others said, “Next time, just bring us doughnuts or sausage and biscuits.” The children also rejected the Mexican feast (“What *is* that stuff?”) though the women loved it. What we can only describe as wellness-resistant attitudes seemed fairly common (grumbling about walking up hill, a dozen cigarette breaks in the course of an eight-hour day).

We also recognize the need for better preparation for participants with disabilities. Two women could not take part in the more strenuous activities due to health problems, and the fast-paced days were especially tiring for them. Clearly, this has to be addressed as well.

Here are some fine details we would suggest for anyone planning a similar camp. First, although we neglected to do background checks on student counselors, we intend to do so next year (partly because of increased fears about sexual offenders working with children). Second, a

university staff counselor was on hand for most of the camp and proved to be an essential presence the day we discussed sexual abuse. Finally, we mindfully structured the women's activities to build relationships and trust the first two days, reach a peak of emotional sharing mid-week followed by a day of recovery, and close with a day of celebration:

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| Monday | "Getting to Know You"—ice breaker activities; goal-setting; journal writing; poetry |
| Tuesday | "Building Trust"—field trip; team-building and bonding |
| Wednesday | "Sharing"—telling stories on a necklace; financial aid for higher education; sexual trauma workshop |
| Thursday | "Recovery"—self-expression/painting workshop; civic engagement/talk with the mayor |
| Friday | "Celebration"—science “magic show”; live music; make-overs; graduation |

The emphasis on the arts helped the women to see themselves as capable of making art and creating something out of their own ideas. The participants, in the assessment survey, listed their favorite activities, and why:

- Poetry: “Makes me free”
- Yoga: “relaxing even though I couldn’t completely do everything”
- Self-Defense/Abuse Awareness: “it was educational”/ “it was beneficial”/ “useful”
- Beading: “because it made me see how unique I am”/ “I learned a lot about my feelings and myself”/ “thoughtful”/ “because we shared”
- Painting: “because it was a new experience”/ “It brought out a passion I didn’t have anymore because I was told I wasn’t any good”/ “Cause I never knew there was an artist in me.”

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