

SINGAPORE MANAGEMENT UNIVERSITY: Leadership through Serving the Community



By Thomas Menkhoff

Founded in 2000 and modeled after the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, Singapore Management University grooms outstanding business leaders and creative entrepreneurs capable of excelling in a rapidly changing world. All undergraduates at SMU must complete a “Leadership and Team-building” course as one of a number of core courses. The leadership course helps students develop their own leadership and team-building competencies through application-oriented cases, exercises, self-assessments, role-plays and games. More than just learning from one another in class, students engage in a large-scale community service project and receive hands-on, real-life experiences that facilitate the learning of team dynamics, situational leadership, and negotiation and communication skills. Incorporating real-world community service into the course is part of SMU’s mission to the wider world; all SMU students, for example, must serve 80 hours of community service before they graduate.

A group of seasoned “Team Advisors” form the pillar of the leadership course. These advisors – selected students who have previously completed the course themselves – are responsible for facilitating group sessions and discussions, helping students understand concepts and project-related issues, and ensuring that projects are completed in a timely and professional manner; they also evaluate student performance. Team advisors, however, are not meant to solve a team’s problems. Rather, they serve as “coaches,” with their primarily responsibility being the mission of learning. Although team advisors are unpaid, top performers have a chance to become a “Head Team Advisor” the following semester, a role in which they oversee curricular development, student assessment, and client management. In working closely with students, team advisors get to deepen their intra and inter-personal competencies, which are essential for leadership success.



The pedagogical philosophy of the leadership course is that skills and concepts are best internalized through action learning. At the core of the learning experience is the group-based Community Service Project, in which students put leadership concepts to work in the field. In one project, for example, students mounted a photography exhibit to sensitize

others to the unique challenges migrant workers face in Singapore. Other projects have included staging a recycling fair in a public housing area aimed at creating awareness about environmental issues and providing children from disadvantaged families with eye-care services. Because such projects are executed in conjunction with local non-governmental organizations, students have a chance to envision future job opportunities in full-time or volunteer community-service work.

Students document project outcomes and key takeaways in portfolios, which include a journal. Through journal entries, students sort through their experiences and reflect on how they – as leaders, followers and team members – contributed to the successful outcomes of the project. Besides documenting their understanding of the practical application of leadership and team-building concepts, they also specify possible future actions they may take as a result of their systematic reflection. Students also present their projects and experiences in class.



SMU is currently piloting a more formalized, longitudinal assessment for leadership development. The new approach will provide data to participating students on their individual strengths and overall development. Students will receive a detailed feedback report, and instructors will discuss these in class, as part of an overall look at the teams' effectiveness. These assessment tools will help identify personal predictors of students' personal growth and leadership development trajectories. Through these initiatives, SMU hopes to create a platform to help Singapore's future leaders make a difference in the lives of others, both through their work and in their communities at large.

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