

Cultivating Changemakers for Community Engagement: The Case of the Sullivan Foundation Fellows Program

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Abstract

This study reports the design, implementation, and outcomes of the Sullivan Fellows Program, a multiyear leadership initiative that integrates high-impact practices (HIPs) and community engagement through the Agency–Relationships–Contribution Impact Framework. Survey data and qualitative reflections from the 2025 cohorts indicate growth in leadership competencies, especially communication, resilience, and collaboration. The Sullivan Fellows Program offers a scalable model for higher education institutions seeking to combine community engagement, leadership development, and purposeful community impact.

Higher education institutions increasingly acknowledge community engagement as a critical component of student development. Recognized as a high-impact practice (HIP), community engagement supports academic achievement, civic responsibility, and personal growth. A growing body of research underscores the significant role of community-based and civic engagement experiences, such as service-learning, student retreats, internships, and study abroad programs, in advancing student development across multiple dimensions. These practices have been consistently linked to enhanced civic-mindedness, ethical reasoning, intercultural competence, and a deeper commitment to social responsibility (Saavedra et al., 2022). Moreover, participation in community-engaged practices correlates positively with key academic outcomes, including improved retention and graduation rates (Chittum et al., 2022). Complementing these findings, Zhou and colleagues (2022) demonstrated that short-term community-based programs that connect students with local business history and entrepreneurial ventures not only foster stronger community ties but also deepen students’ understanding of local economies and encourage professional exploration. Participants in these initiatives reported greater civic awareness and belonging, particularly among new and international students. Collectively, these results highlight the transformative potential of accessible community-based initiatives in promoting student development, academic integration, and sustained engagement with place.

Community engagement in higher education is broadly understood as a collaborative partnership

between academic institutions and public or private sector for enriching learning, enhancing research, fostering civic responsibility, and contributing to the broader public good (Bringle & Hatcher, 2002). These reciprocal partnerships offer students real-world learning experiences that cultivate critical thinking, social responsibility, and career preparedness (Gross et al., 2015). Simultaneously, communities benefit through increased empowerment, economic development, and improved overall well-being. Despite these mutual advantages, the practice of community engagement may face structural and relational barriers such as power imbalances, limited institutional support, and difficulty evaluating the long-term impact and sustainability of community engagement initiatives (Muwanguzi et al., 2023). In addressing these challenges, community-based foundations are uniquely positioned to support and strengthen engagement efforts by offering localized insights, resources, and sustained partnership.

The Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation is dedicated to inspiring and equipping young people to pursue lives of purpose through service, community engagement, and ethical leadership. At the heart of the Foundation’s work is the Agency–Relationships–Contribution (ARC) Impact Framework, which functions as both a pedagogical model and a developmental road map for cultivating changemakers. The framework equips students with the mindset, skills, and leadership capacities needed to create meaningful impact in their communities. It draws on and adapts concepts introduced by Gergen, Rego, and Wright (2014) in *Developing a Billion Leaders*.

The ARC Impact Framework provides a structured pathway for leadership development grounded in authenticity, community engagement, and purposeful impact. Drawing on emerging global leadership practices (Gergen et al., 2014; Rego & Gergen, 2017), it emphasizes three core dimensions. Agency emphasizes navigating change with self-awareness, resilience, and purpose. Relationships focus on building trust and practicing “boundary-spanning leadership” (Rego & Gergen, 2017, p.49), where students learn to work across difference and collaborate toward shared goals. Contribution highlights the importance of transforming insight and empathy into tangible action through community projects, entrepreneurial ventures, and social innovation. Whether through community change projects, entrepreneurial labs, or social innovation ecosystems, the Framework prepares and empowers students to act as effective changemakers.

Serving as both a developmental guide and a cultural commitment (as shown in Figure 1), the Framework illustrates how leadership develops through three interconnected domains—Agency, Relationships, and Contribution—providing a scaffolded pathway from self-awareness to collaboration to purposeful community impact.

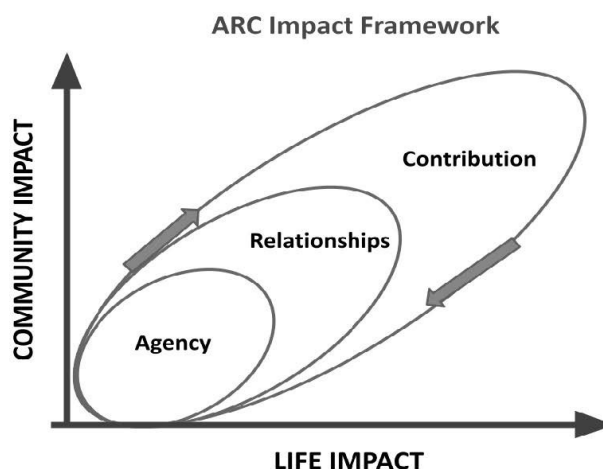
This paper presents a case study of the Sullivan Fellows Program, a multiyear leadership initiative informed by the ARC Impact Framework. The Fellows Program is conceptualized primarily as a leadership development program intended to strengthen students’ capacity to lead collectively and build social capital while intentionally integrating elements of leader development that foster individual growth. The study asks: How

does the Sullivan Fellows Program, guided by the ARC Impact Framework, influence undergraduate students’ leadership development and community engagement? The program is distinct in its intentional integration of two domains often treated separately in higher education. Community engagement is embedded through immersive retreats, asset-based inquiry, and collaborations with local partners, while leadership development is advanced through a 3-year scaffolded model focusing on agency in Year 1, relationships in Year 2, and contribution through community impact in Year 3. The paper reviews relevant scholarship, outlines the methodology, and presents findings with implications for future practice and research.

Literature Review

Community engagement, once considered peripheral, is increasingly recognized as an important element of higher education, particularly within public and land-grant institutions. Scholars increasingly argue that engagement should be embedded into the teaching, research, and service missions of higher education institutions. Fitzgerald et al. (2012) traced the evolution from the Morrill Act’s original mission, which established land-grant institutions to provide practical education in agriculture and mechanical arts, to today’s call for higher education to be responsive, reciprocal, and rooted in public good. They also called for cultural and structural changes, such as revised faculty reward systems, budgetary support, community-involved governance, and robust evaluation frameworks, that are characterized by mutual benefits, responsiveness to societal needs, and alignment with democratic values.

Figure 1.



Martin, Weng, and Kliever (2022) extended this conversation by arguing that leadership learning should be assessed at the group level, with attention to how cohorts collectively engage in dialogue, relational networks, and problem-solving processes. Their framework emphasizes the importance of evaluating group performance, cohesion, and collective capacity while also attending to equity and justice in group dynamics. This perspective shifts the focus from individual outcomes to the ways groups function as learning communities, underscoring the values of collective inquiry and shared responsibility. Such an approach aligns closely with the Sullivan Fellows Program, which integrates community engagement and leadership development through the ARC Impact Framework to cultivate agency, relationships, and contribution across multiyear cohorts.

Empirical studies reinforce the educational and developmental value of community engagement. For example, Otto and Dunens (2021) examined how community-engaged learning (CEL), including service-learning and nonprofit internships, prepares students for key career competencies like critical thinking, communication, and teamwork. Drawing on qualitative data from students, faculty, and community partners, their findings suggest that CEL bridges civic learning and career readiness, making student experiences both personally transformative and professionally relevant.

Community engagement also plays a critical role in elevating educational equity. Villamizar Duarte et al. (2023) examined the impact of four service-learning and community engagement programs at the University of Illinois Chicago and found that these programs significantly improved academic performance, credit accumulation, and graduation rates among underrepresented students. These gains were especially pronounced among first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized students, suggesting that engagement not only enhances outcomes but also helps close achievement gaps.

Community engagement is a powerful, purpose-driven approach that belongs at the heart of higher education. When institutions integrate community engagement into teaching, research, and service, they create space for deeper learning, stronger partnerships, and positive outcomes. This work challenges universities to shift their cultures, reimagine their systems, and build trust with the communities they serve.

When students engage with communities

through academic work, a powerful avenue for leader development emerges. Cleveland and Cleveland (2018) framed leadership in community engagement as a collaborative process of shared power, while Kniffin and Sapra (2021) showed that civic engagement projects shift students' views from leader-centric to collective leadership by allowing them to practice problem-solving in real contexts. Kliever and Priest (2018) and Stoecker, Tryon, and Hilgendorf (2009) emphasized that community engagement should move beyond transactional service to a shared leadership model in which community organizations have an equal role in shaping and benefiting from partnerships.

The Sullivan Fellows Program demonstrates how leadership development can be intentionally leveraged to prepare students for meaningful community engagement as changemakers. By integrating high-impact strategies, fellows apply their leadership growth to collaborative projects with local partners that address pressing community needs.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative case study approach to explore the design, implementation, and outcomes of the Sullivan Fellows Program. As defined by Yin (2017), the case study approach allows for a detailed, context-rich examination of the Sullivan Fellows Program. This method is particularly appropriate given the study's focus on a complex multiyear leadership initiative and its aim of understanding the program's development process and impact on student participants. This study examines student development and documents the structure of the Fellows Program through an analysis of multiple data sources, including institutional documents and a structured postprogram survey. The analysis is limited to student outcomes and program design rather than an assessment of community partner impact.

Internal Documents

Program documents produced by the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation were reviewed to understand the evolution and foundation of the Fellows Program. These materials included strategic goals, curriculum guides, implementation blueprints, program rubrics, and internal communication records and helped clarify the ARC Impact Framework's structure.

Evaluation Survey

To evaluate the impact of the Sullivan Fellows

Program on student leadership development, a structured survey instrument was designed in alignment with the ARC Impact Framework. The development of the survey was a collaborative process involving program designers, leadership educators, and assessment specialists contracted with the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation. The instrument with closed-ended and open-ended questions was intended to capture student self-assessment across three developmental domains: Agency, Relationships, and Contribution and to identify the "why" and "how" behind student answers.

Drawing on the program's learning objectives and interpersonal skills aligning with the ARC Impact Framework, the survey included 15 items, each of which was formulated to reflect a specific behavioral indicator of growth. All were measured using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The survey was administered at the conclusion of the Spring 2025 retreat, serving as a summative assessment of fellows' development. We present a crosswalk in Table 1 linking each ARC domain to its associated learning objectives, which are listed in Table 2, survey questions, and the targeted interpersonal skills.

All aspects of the study were conducted in accordance with ethical standards for research involving human subjects. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and confidentiality was maintained by anonymizing all survey data and field observations. As the data collection was embedded within a programmatic evaluation process and posed minimal risk to participants, the study was determined to be exempt from formal institutional review board review. Nevertheless, all research activities were guided by principles of voluntary participation, respect for privacy, and integrity in data analysis.

Findings

Background of Algernon Sydney Sullivan Foundation

According to the Sullivan Foundation website, the organization's mission "is to equip, support, and honor service-oriented college students and faculty in institutions across the American South to make lasting positive change in their communities" (Sullivan Foundation, n.d.). Through a unique blend of leadership development and community engagement programming, the Foundation partners with more than 70 colleges and universities to provide students with experiential learning opportunities that cultivate changemakers.

Signature initiatives such as the Sullivan Fellows Program, Ignite Retreats, and the Sullivan Service Corps empower students to explore their passions, develop innovative solutions to social challenges, and become lifelong changemakers. In addition to these programs, the Foundation administers the prestigious Sullivan Awards, one of the oldest recognitions of character and service in American higher education, and provides scholarships to students who demonstrate academic excellence, integrity, and a deep commitment to serving others (Sullivan Foundation, n.d.).

Program Design

The Sullivan Foundation Fellows Program is designed to help students grow into thoughtful leaders and changemakers within their communities. It was launched with four participating partner schools, following strong interest from university partners looking for more intentional, student-centered leadership development opportunities. Currently, the program includes 12 institutions. These institutions reflected a diverse cross-section of higher education settings, including small liberal arts colleges, regional private and faith-based universities, and large public universities. Student fellows were typically nominated in their freshman year and entered the program as sophomores, with progression through three distinct phases: Leaders (sophomore), Allies (junior), and Changemakers (senior).

Although the program design allowed each participating institution to nominate up to 12 fellows, the initiative launched with only four schools in its first year and gradually expanded as additional campuses joined annually. In some cases, staffing transitions and budgets at partner institutions constrained their capacity to nominate a full cohort of students. Over time, a small number of fellows also withdrew or transferred to institutions outside the program network, which further reduced the number of active participants. These factors collectively explain the smaller sample size reflected in this study.

The 3-year program equips students with a foundation of leadership training, one-on-one coaching, and a supportive network of peers and mentors. Student fellows are typically nominated in their freshman year and enter the program as sophomores, and each participating college or university is responsible for selecting its fellows. Each class within the program has a distinct identity to reflect its stage of development: Sophomores

Table 1. Impact Assessment Rubric

ARC Impact Framework	Learning Objectives	Question	Interpersonal Skills
Agency	Intentional	I set clear goals in my daily activities (e.g., schoolwork, personal tasks) and take intentional actions to achieve them.	Planning/ Organization
	Reflective	I regularly reflect on my experiences to identify areas for improvement and implement strategies to enhance my performance based on academic and professional feedback.	Critical Thinking
	Humble	I actively seek feedback, acknowledge my limitations, and integrate feedback into my work.	Critical Thinking
	Growth Minded	I view challenges as opportunities for growth and demonstrate persistence in overcoming obstacles.	Self-Awareness
	Vision	I articulate a clear vision to inspire and motivate others to work toward shared goals.	Visioning
Relationships	Emotionally Intelligent	I manage my emotions effectively when dealing with challenges in academic or personal settings.	Self-Awareness
	Active Listener	I engage fully in conversations and actively listen to others to enhance mutual understanding.	Communication
	Culturally Engaged	I understand and appreciate diverse cultural contexts in my interactions.	Equity and Inclusion
	Integrator	I integrate diverse perspectives to facilitate problem-solving in group projects.	Diversity
	Communicator	I communicate my ideas clearly to diverse audiences in both written and oral formats.	Communication
Contribution	Cocreator	I work well with others to achieve common goals, like completing group projects or organizing activities.	Teamwork
	Action Oriented	I start tasks, lead projects, or find solutions to problems, both at school and at home.	Planning/ Organization
	Resourceful	I effectively identify and utilize available resources to achieve my objectives.	Adaptability
	Accountable	I take responsibility for my actions.	Self-Management
	Resilient	I persevere through challenges and maintain a positive problem-solving mindset.	Growth Mindset

are called Leaders, juniors are Allies, and seniors are Changemakers. These names are not just symbolic—they align with specific learning goals and development outcomes that provide a scaffolded leadership development journey. Sophomore Leaders begin the program with a fall retreat that introduces core leadership concepts. They next take a virtual Leadership Literacy course before returning for a spring retreat to practice and refine those skills. In the junior Allies cohort, the emphasis shifts from personal leadership to relationship building and community engagement. This stage integrates a fall retreat with a Community Development course and concludes with a spring retreat that supports fellows in translating learning into collaborative projects with local partners. In the senior Changemakers phase, the program culminates in the design and implementation of impact-driven initiatives. This year combines a fall retreat, a Life Entrepreneurship course focused on project development, and a spring retreat that highlights reflection, presentation, and celebration of fellows’ contributions. Collectively, this structure illustrates how the program systematically builds

leadership capacity while embedding fellows in authentic community engagement experiences. Table 2 provides a full overview of the program’s learning outcomes that aligns with the ARC Impact Framework.

Program Implementation

The Sullivan Foundation Fellows Program follows a structured 3-year leadership development model as described above. Each year is designed to guide students through a developmental journey that moves from self-discovery to community engagement to impact-driven action. Fellows are required to attend fall and spring retreats in Asheville, NC, which include face-to-face instruction, community activities, and group work. Community partners are engaged during the fall and spring retreats, where they participate in leadership panels to share experiences and insights with fellows. Monthly virtual sessions for fellows are delivered via Zoom between the fall and spring retreats. Community partners are not directly involved in the monthly virtual sessions. The Sullivan Fellows Program offers a thoughtfully

Table 2. Learning Outcomes for the Sullivan Foundation Fellows Program

Agency	Relationships	Contribution
- Intentional: Purposeful in actions and decisions, driven by clear goals. - Reflective: Consistently self-evaluates to improve personal, academic, and professional practices. - Humble: Open to feedback, acknowledges personal limitations and the contributions of others, and prioritizes collaboration over ego. - Growth Minded: Embraces challenges and sees effort as a path to mastery. - Visionary: Envisions future possibilities and inspires others toward achieving them.	- Emotionally Intelligent: Recognizes and manages one’s own emotions and those of others. - Active Listener: Fully engages thoughtfully through communication with others. - Culturally Engaged: Engages with different social, community, and cultural contexts by putting empathy into action. - Integrator: Helps bring together diverse perspectives and considers current context to form a coherent viewpoint of how complex systems work within communities. - Communicator: Articulates ideas clearly and persuasively.	- Cocreator: Fosters a collaborative, team-oriented environment to develop and achieve common goals. - Action Oriented: Initiates and drives projects forward to realize innovative solutions. - Resourceful: Identifies, attracts, and harnesses resources and builds supportive relationships and networks creatively to advance collective impact. - Accountable: Takes responsibility for actions and continually measuring outcomes; reliable in commitments. - Resilient: Maintains realistic optimism, exhibits grit and resilience through adaptive persistence in the face of new information, challenges, and changing conditions.

sequenced, multiyear experience grounded in leadership theory and community engagement practice. By integrating mentorship, coaching, and peer collaboration across diverse institutional and geographic contexts, the program not only supports individual growth but also fosters a culture of changemaking.

The structured progression through the ARC Impact Framework ensures that fellows leave the program with a deeper understanding of themselves and their communities and with tangible leadership experience that positions them far ahead of their peers. With localized faculty support and an intentional emphasis on service and impact, the program exemplifies how higher education can cultivate the next generation of purpose-driven leaders equipped to address pressing community needs. Each participating institution appoints a campus liaison (typically a faculty or staff member) who provides mentorship, facilitates communication with the Foundation, and connects fellows to service and community engagement opportunities in their local context.

In the Changemakers phase, entrepreneurship is incorporated as a mindset rather than a directive to launch new organizations. The curriculum emphasizes growth mindset, resilience, and the entrepreneurial spirit as tools for addressing complex community challenges. Fellows are encouraged to think creatively, identify opportunities, mobilize resources, and design innovative solutions that generate meaningful impact. While some students may ultimately pursue their own ventures, the primary goal is to equip fellows with transferable entrepreneurial approaches that can be applied across nonprofit, civic, and organizational contexts. In this way, entrepreneurship serves as a developmental framework for changemaking rather than a prescriptive outcome of the fellowship.

Year 1: Agency (Leaders) In their first year, fellows focus on building a strong sense of self-awareness and exploring their individual leadership potential. At the fall retreat, fellows connect with community leaders and participate in reflective, interactive exercises. Community leaders involved in the retreats are identified through local organizational networks, a snowball referral process, and prior connections to the Sullivan Foundation. Throughout the year, students receive guidance from leadership educators and begin identifying their unique strengths and talents. They participate in monthly virtual sessions that continue their leadership development. At

the spring retreat, fellows focus on leadership strategies, grit, and self-discipline and complete the Leadership Literacy curriculum (Holland, 2023).

Year 2: Relationships (Allies) The second year emphasizes the importance of relationships and collaborative leadership. Fellows deepen their understanding of leadership through hands-on community engagement and team-based projects chosen by Foundation staff based on established partnerships and community-identified needs. At the fall retreat, fellows learn how to cultivate meaningful relationships that drive positive change by identifying a specific issue relevant to their community. After the retreat, fellows join virtual sessions on allyship, emotional intelligence, and power mapping, then design community projects by assessing assets and power structures in their local context.

In addition, fellows work directly with local partners on initiatives rooted in asset-based community development, gaining experience in coalition building and collective problem-solving. For example, two students emerged with initiatives that reflected both personal passion and a commitment to social justice. One student addressed food insecurity by proposing to partner with a farmers market and a church pantry to create “Fresh Wheels,” a mobile produce distribution program that delivers fresh fruits and vegetables to underserved neighborhoods while promoting nutritional education. Another fellow, driven by personal ties to immigration, developed “Bridge to Counsel,” an initiative connecting pro bono immigration attorneys with undocumented individuals through trusted community spaces like libraries and ESL classrooms. These initiatives illustrate how the Sullivan Fellows Program empowers students to translate personal passion into community-centered action and demonstrates its capacity to cultivate socially responsive leaders committed to human dignity and opportunity.

Year 3: Contributions (Changemakers) In their final year, the focus shifts toward implementation. Fellows are challenged to launch community impact initiatives, ventures, or community projects that address real needs. They prepare to pitch their project proposals to local leaders (e.g., nonprofit directors, civic officials, business leaders) and stakeholders directly connected to the issues being addressed. These proposals build on the asset mapping and allyship work completed in Year 2, ensuring that community priorities identified earlier in the program inform the relevance and direction of the projects.

At the fall retreat, fellows examine impact-driven ventures, storytelling, and reflective learning, followed by virtual sessions on the Entrepreneurial Life Plan (Gergen & Vanourek, 2008) and development of a comprehensive e-portfolio. At the spring retreat, fellows foster community reflection, explore the intersection of leadership and impact, evaluate social enterprises, present their personal leadership narratives, and celebrate their achievements and connections made throughout the Sullivan Fellows' experience.

Notably, during the second year of the program's implementation, staffing transitions within the Foundation disrupted the continuity of programming, resulting in a significant drop in participation of this cohort. Only four fellows completed the program during their 2025 senior year, marking the inaugural graduating class. Tables 3, 4, and 5 outline the thematic focus and learning objectives for each stage of the fellows' journey.

Program Outcomes

Descriptive Statistics

The sample for the 2025 Sullivan Fellows Program evaluation survey included 32 participants across three academic cohorts. Of these, 16 respondents (50%) identified as sophomores, reflecting participation from the program's entry-level cohort. Thirteen (13) respondents (41%) were juniors, representing the second-year fellows. The remaining 3 respondents (9%) were seniors in the final phase of the program.

We acknowledge that there are several limitations. The relatively small sample size ($n = 32$), combined with minimal senior cohort representation, constrains the generalizability of findings. In addition, reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for social desirability bias, which may inflate perceptions of growth. Future studies should address these limitations by including external evaluations of fellows' leadership behaviors and conducting longitudinal

Table 3. Sessions Between the Fall and Spring Fellows Retreats for Year 1 Cohort (Leaders)

Month	Session Title	Objectives
October	Fall Fellows Retreat	• Create a community of peer support and belonging • Identify that leadership is challenging • Examine how leadership involves risk, values, and outcomes • Compare motivations and understand toxic leadership
November	Leadership Styles	• Explain various leadership styles • Identify leadership styles in different contexts
December	Servant Leadership	• Describe the importance of being service-oriented • Explain why leaders should serve others
January	Purposeful Leadership	• Understand the importance of their purpose • Describe their personal purpose • Identify steps to implement that purpose
February	Influential and Relational Leadership	• Explain how leaders are influential • Identify leadership skills • Demonstrate leadership strengths • Explain how leaders influence with integrity and power • Explain partner relationships • Demonstrate conflict management styles
March	Spring Fellows Retreat: Project Development	• Explain emotional intelligence • Practice emotional leadership strategies • Explain grit and the link to perseverance • Understand the correlation between self-discipline and performance • Complete the INSPIRED Leadership Framework

tracking of alumni to assess sustained impact over time. Table 6 highlights the results from the postprogram evaluation. This evaluation provides insight into how the fellows program cultivates leadership and changemaking capacity in a way that is both intentional and outcomes driven. Overall, the findings are highly informative of the assessed domains, with all means above 4.0. The high level of agreement underscores the program's positive impact and provides valuable insight for shaping future cohort experiences and targeted interventions.

In the Agency domain, fellows rated themselves strongly on resilience and vision. The statement “I view challenges as opportunities

for growth and demonstrate persistence in overcoming obstacles” received a mean of 4.47 (SD = 0.57), and “I articulate a clear vision to inspire and motivate others to work toward shared goals” received a mean of 4.31 (SD = 0.59), suggesting that participants were confident in overcoming adversity and guiding others. There is still room for improvement in this area, and fellows are encouraged through collaborative exercises to work toward shared goals.

Items related to Relationships scored particularly high. The highest-rated statement was “I understand and appreciate diverse cultural contexts in my interactions” (M = 4.69, SD = 0.47), followed closely by “I integrate diverse perspectives

Table 4. Sessions Between the Fall and Spring Fellows Retreats for Year 2 (Allies)

Month	Session Title	Objectives
October	Fall Fellows Retreat	• Cultivate relationships for positive change • Identify a specific issue to address in context • Begin to identify local partners to connect with in context
November	Asset-Based Community Development	• Identify assets in a local context • Create a map of local assets • Identify assets that address specific issues
December	Allyship	• Connect with local leaders • Conduct one-on-one interviews of local leaders • Identify connections between local assets and allies
January	Emotional Intelligence	• Identify strengths around emotional intelligence • Identify areas of growth for emotional intelligence • Identify connections between EQ and local assets
February	Power Mapping	• Create a map of local power structures • Identify direct connections between power map and asset map • Identify connections between power map and one-on-one interviews
March	Spring Fellows Retreat: Project Development	• Identify specific project to address in context • Identify assets that address specific issues • Explain which power structures will help address issues within the project • Explain which relationships will help guide project design and implementation

Table 5. Sessions Between the Fall and Spring Fellows Retreats for Year 3 (Changemakers)

Month	Session Title	Objectives
October	Fall Fellows Retreat	• Explore leadership through impact-driven ventures • Analyze the role of storytelling in leadership • Engage in reflective learning
November	Entrepreneurial Life Plan: Who Am I?	• Reflect on life's defining moments • Discover and align passions with strengths • Clarify core values and purpose • Assess current needs and motivations • Differentiate between given and chosen aspects of identity
December	Entrepreneurial Life Plan: Where Am I Going?	• Recognize and respond to emerging opportunities • Evaluate opportunities using personal criteria • Craft a personal vision statement • Align personal leadership with ideal leadership • Identify obstacles and tensions in achieving the vision
January	Entrepreneurial Life Plan: How Do I Get There?	• Set short- and long-term goals • Align time management with goals • Develop strategies for goal achievement • Evaluate and strengthen support networks • Create and strengthen a personal board of directors
February	Sullivan Fellows Profile Development: Develop a Comprehensive e-Portfolio	• Articulate personal and academic identity • Craft a compelling personal bio • Identify and express leadership impact • Visualize future aspirations
March	Spring Fellows Retreat	• Foster community reflection • Explore leadership and impact • Evaluate social enterprises • Articulate personal leadership narrative • Celebrate achievements and connections

Table 6. Survey Results

ARC Impact Framework	Question	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Count
Agency	Q1. I set clear goals in my daily activities (e.g., schoolwork, personal tasks) and take intentional actions to achieve them.	4.28	0.63	3.0	5.0	32.0
	Q2. I regularly reflect on my experiences to identify areas for improvement and implement strategies to enhance my performance based on academic and professional feedback.	4.25	0.57	3.0	5.0	32.0
	Q3. I actively seek feedback, acknowledge my limitations, and integrate feedback into my work.	4.19	0.64	3.0	5.0	32.0
	Q4. I view challenges as opportunities for growth and demonstrate persistence in overcoming obstacles.	4.47	0.57	3.0	5.0	32.0
	Q5. I articulate a clear vision to inspire and motivate others to work toward shared goals.	4.31	0.59	3.0	5.0	32.0
Relationships	Q6. I manage my emotions effectively when dealing with challenges in academic or personal settings.	4.12	0.61	3.0	5.0	32.0
	Q7. I engage fully in conversations and actively listen to others to enhance mutual understanding.	4.38	0.49	4.0	5.0	32.0
	Q8. I understand and appreciate diverse cultural contexts in my interactions.	4.69	0.47	4.0	5.0	32.0
	Q9. I integrate diverse perspectives to facilitate problem-solving in group projects.	4.53	0.51	4.0	5.0	32.0
	Q10. I communicate my ideas clearly to diverse audiences in both written and oral formats.	4.06	0.72	3.0	5.0	32.0
Contribution	Q11. I work well with others to achieve common goals, like completing group projects or organizing activities.	4.25	0.67	3.0	5.0	32.0
	Q12. I start tasks, lead projects, or find solutions to problems, both at school and at home.	4.06	0.84	2.0	5.0	32.0
	Q13. I effectively identify and utilize available resources to achieve my objectives.	4.12	0.91	2.0	5.0	32.0
	Q14. I take responsibility for my actions.	4.62	0.55	3.0	5.0	32.0
	Q15. I persevere through challenges and maintain a positive problem-solving mindset.	4.38	0.61	3.0	5.0	32.0

to facilitate problem-solving in group projects” ($M = 4.53$, $SD = 0.51$). These results highlight the program’s effectiveness in attracting student leaders who will foster growth by recognizing the importance of diverse relationships and collaborative leadership skills among their peers. This is particularly beneficial when considering how partnerships between universities and community foundations can best meet the challenges of working in different community contexts.

Within the Contribution domain, the statement “I take responsibility for my actions” was one of the most strongly endorsed ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.55$), affirming fellows’ commitment to accountability and self-management. Meanwhile, slightly lower but still strong means were observed for items related to initiative and communication, such as “I work well with others to achieve common goals, like completing group projects or organizing activities.” ($M = 4.25$, $SD = 0.67$). These results underscore the program’s success in promoting teamwork, critical thinking, and a strong sense of accountability.

Figure 2 is a heatmap visualizing the average Likert-scale responses to the 15 survey items across the three academic cohorts. The shading of each cell reflects the mean score for that item and cohort, ranging from light blue (lower agreement) to dark red (higher agreement).

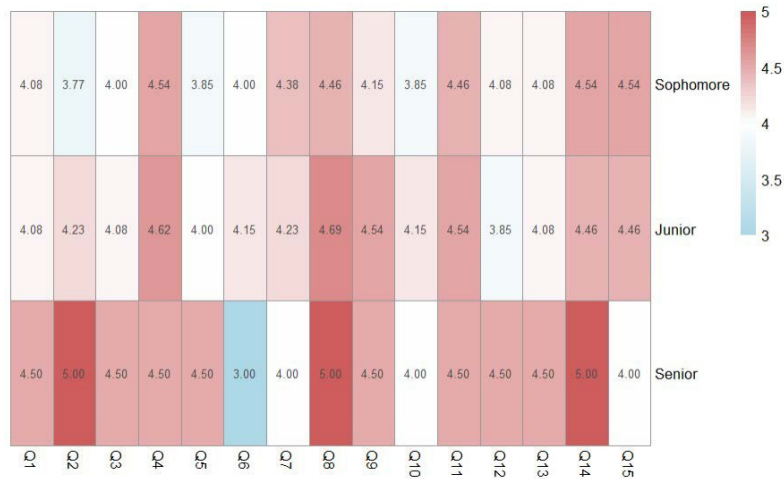
Across all cohorts, the majority of responses fall above a mean score of 4.0, indicating consistently high levels of agreement with leadership development statements. This finding supports earlier descriptive statistics and suggests that participants, regardless of stage, perceive

meaningful personal growth in the key areas of Agency, Relationships, and Contribution. The juniors and seniors exhibited particularly strong scores, with multiple items (e.g. Q2, Q4, Q8, and Q14) receiving ratings of 4.5 or above. In some cases, perfect scores of 5.0 are observed, especially for the senior cohort, reflecting high confidence in competencies related to vision articulation, collaboration, and accountability.

In contrast, sophomore responses display more variability. Several items (e.g., Q2, Q5, Q10, and Q12) received mean ratings below 4.0, which indicate that early-stage fellows may still be developing foundational leadership capacities such as reflectivity, planning, communication, and action orientation. This is visually represented through lighter shades or pale blue cells in the heatmap. Such variation aligns with the program’s design, where sophomores are in the initial phase of leadership development and just beginning to cultivate a sense of agency and self-awareness.

Notably, the senior cohort rated Q6 at a mean of 3.00 (i.e., the lowest value in the data set). Also, the mean scores for Q7, Q10, and Q15 were lower among seniors. Depending on the corresponding survey item, this may reflect perceived challenges or gaps in a specific leadership domain, such as emotional intelligence, active listener, communication, or resilience. However, the interpretation of seniors’ results should be cautious given the very small sample size ($n = 3$). Specifically, with such a small subgroup, individual responses have a disproportionate influence on the mean, making it difficult to identify trends at the senior level. Also, contextual factors such as staff transitions and logistical challenges during the

Figure 2.



program year may have influenced these responses. This limitation suggests the need for additional inquiry to better evaluate sustained development at the capstone stage of the fellowship.

Qualitative Results

Qualitative data collected through open-ended survey questions at the conclusion of the 2025 Spring Retreat provided valuable insights into the specific experiences that contributed to fellows' confidence as leaders.

Fellows reported substantial leadership involvement on campus, which underscores high baseline engagement. For example, some were active in student government (e.g., Student

Government Association officers and senators), residence life (e.g., resident assistants), and student organizations (e.g., orientation leaders, first-year mentors, club presidents, and choir officers). Others took work-based leadership, coaching/assistant roles, or held multiple positions.

While these leadership and service roles already gave fellows strong real-world experience, their reflections uncover how the fellowship further enhanced their capacity, especially by improving their communication skills, helping them build networks, and giving them hands-on and experiential learning opportunities (see Table 7).

In describing the benefits gained from participation in the fellowship, fellows highlighted

Table 7. Thematic Themes From Qualitative Data

Theme	Description	Phrases from Fellows
Leadership development and confidence	Growth in the ability to lead and speak up	"Pitching," "public speaking," "speaking my mind," "getting out of my shell," "finding my voice," "leadership skills," "stepping up," "solidified my club," "more proactive"
Communication and storytelling	Improved ability to communicate and advocate ideas clearly	"Articulate the type of leader I want to be," "talk about my projects," "communicate my ideas," "tell my story," "networking and skill recognition tools"
Networking and social capital	Building lasting relationships or professional networks with peers, mentors, and changemakers	"Meeting new people," "connections," "collaborations with fellows," "networking across schools," "alumni connections," "support system/mentorship"
Mentorship	Recognition of two-way mentorship relationships	"Mentorship is vital," "consistent follow-up," "mentors are just people," "being supported," "helping us connect with alumni," "guidance and advice"
Experiential learning	Gaining confidence and skills through hands-on practices	"Pitch practice," "poster sessions," "building exercises," "service-oriented trips," "scenario-based programs to fail when things don't matter," "real-world exposure"
Self-awareness	Discovering personal strengths, leadership style, and core values	"Knowing my color," "True Colors assessment," "life plan," "understanding my context," "figuring out the kind of leader I want to be"
Community impact	Desire to create lasting change through advocacy, education, health, and systemic changes	"Be an advocate," "empower the next generation," "improve lives of community members," "mental stability, education, and life skills," "bridging resources to rural areas"
Career preparedness	How fellowship experiences translate into professional growth and future opportunities	"Bolstered my network for advocacy roles," "more certain of my career path," "added a second major," "prepared for leadership challenges," "clarity of direction"
Collaboration and learning from peers	Learning from and with other fellows	"Brainstorming together," "group discussions," "diverse perspectives," "learning from my peers," "talking in a circle"

growth in areas related to career competence (Otto and Dunens, 2021). Fellows noted that connections and building community networks were among the most important benefits of the program. Fellows also emphasized improved communication skills as key to their ability to contribute to change in their communities.

Fellows' emphasis on networking and connections highlights the program's role in facilitating the exchange of social and cultural capital. Social capital refers to the sum of enduring networks made up of mutual relationships, recognition, and trust, which is often supported by social or institutional structures (Bourdieu, 1986). Strong social capital helps facilitate productive outcomes.

When asked "In what ways would you like to make a positive impact in your community?", fellows reinforced the role of community engagement in offering students real-world learning experiences that cultivate critical thinking skills and social responsibility (Gross et al., 2015). Three recurrent themes emerged from their responses: capacity building, opportunity development and exposure, and systemic change. Many fellows expressed the desire to build others' capacities through education and mentorship. For example, one student mentioned their desire to empower the next generation, "I would like to create programs that provide academic support, career guidance, and leadership training for kids from diverse backgrounds. By tutoring and mentoring students, I can help build their confidence and equip them with the skills they need to succeed."

Other participants emphasized advocacy and creating awareness about resources and the need for large-scale system change. The emergence of these two themes underscores the findings of Klierer and Priest (2018), which described participants with strong inclinations toward individual service who simultaneously had aspirations for collective action.

The benefits of the fellowship program also support observations by Gross et al. (2015) about the importance of community engagement activities in enhancing student career preparedness. Fellows reported an increased sense of confidence and self-awareness as a result of their participation in the program.

In response to "What specific experiences in the fellowship helped increase your confidence as a leader?", fellows' reflections revealed five key themes. First, the most frequently cited factor was public speaking and communication, with

participants noting that opportunities to articulate their ideas, present projects, and engage in group discussions significantly boosted their leadership confidence. Second, many fellows emphasized the importance of a supportive and affirming peer environment where they felt heard, validated, and encouraged by others navigating similar experiences.

Another prominent theme was mentorship and exposure to changemakers. Fellows described how learning from entrepreneurs, community leaders, and peers inspired their belief in their own potential. Fellows also cited the impact of project-based and experiential learning, including activities such as pitching ideas, working on team projects, and participating in virtual sessions and workshops. Finally, some students pointed out self-awareness and identity development, noting that the fellowship helped them better define the kind of leader they aspire to be.

These themes together mirror the fellowship's ARC Impact Framework. For example, the confidence obtained through public speaking and project leadership reflects a growing sense of agency and the belief in one's capacity to make a difference. The emphasis on peer support and mentorship highlights the importance of relationships and networks in leadership development. Additionally, the real-world projects and community engagement underscore meaningful contributions to society. Together, the themes that emerged from the students' contributions reflected the ARC model, with responses targeted toward feelings of agency, the importance of relationships, and the nature of contributions.

The alignment of fellows' experiences with the ARC Impact Framework provides a promising model for cultivating student leadership through community engagement. Building on these findings, future studies can track changes in students' agency, relational support, and contribution before, during, and after the fellowship and evaluate how participation in the program changes students' leadership.

Discussion and Conclusion

This paper explores the design, implementation, and outcomes of the Sullivan Fellows Program, focusing on how leadership development can be intentionally leveraged to prepare students for meaningful community engagement as changemakers. These findings align with the broader landscape of higher education's commitment to HIPs and student development.

Institutions increasingly recognize that HIPs, such as service-learning, community-based research, and global learning, play a critical role in connecting classroom learning to real-world challenges, deepening students' civic identity, and fostering transferable skills like leadership, critical thinking, and collaboration (Chittum et al., 2022; Finley & McNair, 2013).

Research affirms the effectiveness of such programs as the Sullivan Fellows Program. Chittum et al. (2022) found that community-based HIPs, especially when students participated in more than one, were associated with significant gains in civic-mindedness, ethical reasoning, problem-solving, and a deeper sense of social responsibility. Similarly, Finley and McNair (2013) reported that underserved students who participated in HIPs experienced increased retention, perceived learning gains, and academic success relative to peers with no such exposure. These findings reinforce the Sullivan Foundation's efforts to ensure the Fellows experience is transformative, bridging opportunity gaps while cultivating changemakers for social change.

This study contributes to the literature by documenting how the Sullivan Fellows Program operationalizes the ARC Impact Framework as a multiyear, multi-institutional model of leadership development. Rather than replicating prior studies, our findings extend existing research by showing how a scaffolded program fosters growth in resilience, communication, and collaboration while also revealing developmental differences across cohorts. Moreover, the Sullivan Fellows Program exemplifies a scalable model that merges leadership education with community engagement. This program reflects scholarship calling for leadership models grounded in place and collective purpose; Worrall and Rogers (2024) highlighted the MST-C Model as one such framework for fostering individual and community transformation.

The immersive, cohort-based design mirrors national models like the Engaged Scholars Initiative (Campus Compact, n.d.) and Civic Scholars Program at Washington University in St. Louis (Gephardt Institute, n.d.), which stress sustained engagement, peer learning, and mentorship, underscoring the value of long-term investment in student leadership.

While the findings presented affirm the promise of the Sullivan Fellows Program, several limitations must be acknowledged: The small sample size, limited senior participation, and

reliance on self-reports constrain generalizability. Lack of demographic data also prevents analysis of representation. Future studies should include demographic measures and longitudinal tracking to assess sustained impact. Finally, a key limitation of this study is its exclusive focus on student outcomes. While the Sullivan Fellows Program is intentionally designed to be reciprocal, engaging both students and community partners in mutually beneficial learning, this case study did not systematically collect data from community partners or measure the program's direct community impact. Future research should incorporate partner surveys, interviews, and assessments of project outcomes to capture the reciprocal dimension of the fellowship. Doing so would not only strengthen the evidence base for the program but also ensure that community voices are central in evaluating the integration of leadership development and community engagement.

Despite the limitations, the study contributes to a better understanding of how to enhance leadership development and community engagement through educational programs. Specifically, building on these findings, several recommendations emerge for enhancing future iterations of the program. Communication skill development should be intentionally scaffolded across all 3 years of the fellowship to strengthen fellows' ability to lead and collaborate. In addition, structured alumni engagement could provide continuity, mentorship, and clearer evidence of the program's enduring influence. Lastly, incorporating systematic feedback from community partners would offer valuable insights into the reciprocal benefits of community engagement and contribute to a more robust evaluation framework.

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