

The DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative:
Evaluation of a Youth Ministry Training Program

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Description of Program: The DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative (DVULI)

(www.devosurbanleadership.org) is a national, evangelical faith-based leadership training program for adult urban youth leaders. The primary purpose of this DeVos Family Foundations-sponsored program is to equip urban youth leaders with personal values (e.g. personal balance, mutual accountability, interdependence, etc.) and concrete community development skills (e.g. community capacity building, resource networking, collaboration, etc.) needed to enhance and sustain long-term training and involvement with urban youth, including collaboration with churches and other city-based youth education and development programs. DVULI graduates apply leadership values and skills in a wide variety of ways, such as developing values education programs for after-school programs, or collaborating with other community agencies to reduce violence, provide after-school tutoring, prevent substance use, or reduce the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

Each year, approximately 40 participants (10-15 persons from four cities) complete a cohort-based 15-month training program that includes two national conferences, five city conferences, bi-monthly group meetings, and individualized monthly leadership mentoring sessions. The leadership training curriculum, developed by a team of nationally recognized urban youth leaders, engages participants in deeper exploration of core values, training in practical leadership skills, and development of an individualized ministry action plan. Established in 1997, it is believed to be the longest running inter-faith urban youth leadership training program in the U.S. A total of 480 participants from 24 cities had completed the training between 1997 – 2005, representing eight graduating cohorts.

Relevant Research and Policy Literature: A variety of risky behaviors, including illegal drug use, early sexual activity, and violence are among the top causes of disease and early death among youth

(Centers for Disease Control, 2006). In particular, children and youth in poor urban communities often experience persistent poverty, high rates of single parenthood, and excessive exposure to illegal and violent behaviors (Arthur, et al., 2002; Howell, 2003). However, research has repeatedly shown that children and youth who are connected to family, community, and faith-based institutions are less likely to engage in such risky behaviors (Kegler, et al., 2005; Kline, 2008; Stouthamer-Loeber, et al., 2004).

One of the avenues through which faith and community leaders and institutions can assist in reducing risky behaviors among youth is through promotion of social capital, defined as the sum of “active connections among people: the trust, mutual understanding, and shared values and behaviors that bind the members of human networks and communities and make cooperative action possible” (Cohen & Prusak, 2001, p.4). Increased social capital has been associated with an increase in social and civic life (Putnam, 2000; Winter, 2002; The World Bank, 2003). Economic development and the overall well-being of a neighborhood have also been linked to the amount of social capital present (Caughy, O’Campo, & Muntaner, 2003; Putnam, 2000; Healy & Côté, 2001).

On the other hand, reduced levels of social capital have been linked to lower levels of physical and emotional health as well as depression and mortality within some communities (Kawachi, 2001; Kawachi, 1999; Kawachi et al., 1997; Latkin & Curry, 2003). Kawachi and his colleagues (1997) also suggest that social trust and group membership are associated with total mortality as well as death from coronary heart disease, malignant neoplasms, and infant mortality. Wilson (1991) suggests that diminishing social capital within a community may even help to determine the prevalence of poverty.

Woolcock (2001) and Gilchrist (2004) further distinguish between *bonding, bridging, and linking forms* of social capital. *Bonding* capital takes place between similar people with strongly shared commitments like family, friends, and other similarly connected groups. *Bridging* capital refers to the overlapping interests of people who may have no obvious common bonds, such as members of a community, but who come together to conduct a protest, voice a concern, or take collective action. Bridging capital implies horizontal

connections between people who share similar economic status and political power (Gilchrist, 2004; Larsen et al. 2004; & Middleton et al, 2005). *Linking* social capital is “derived from the links between people or organizations beyond peer boundaries, cutting across status and similarity and enabling people to exert influence and reach resources outside their normal circles” (Gilchrist, 2004, p.6). It also could be seen as vertical connections between underprivileged individuals and people in positions of power in official organizations. As will be seen in the results of this evaluation, examples of all three forms of social capital are created through DVULI’s training.

Within the faith-based context, many organizations involved in community building are using elements of bridging, bonding and linking capital in their attempts to provide community service programs, reduce youth risky behaviors, develop peace and conflict resolution initiatives, and pursue social justice projects (Furbey et al., 2006). Some researchers in the U.S. and British governments have recently developed an interest in understanding the relationship between social capital and the role of faith in community building. Such interest has increased as social capital is seen more and more “as contributing to better educational attainment, lower crime levels, improved health, more active citizenship, better functioning labor markets and higher economic growth” (Furbey et al., 2006, p.1).

Although faith communities are increasingly being seen as providing important access to bonding, bridging, and linking capital, Furbey and his colleagues note that it is important to consider that “the formation of bridging and linking social capital is strongly influenced by the numerical size of the faith communities; their diversity in ethnic, linguistic, cultural and religious terms; and particularly their geographic concentration or dispersion (2006, p. 12).” Hernandez and his colleagues (2007) further point out that one of the most important challenges facing the U.S. is dealing with the demands of an increasingly multicultural society. Many ethnic and minority communities have deeply rooted religious commitments and lean heavily on faith communities for economic support, social activities, and even health information (VanderWaal, et al., 2003). Religion is also considered a very important factor in civic engagement within

minority communities. For example, Hernandez and his colleagues found that half of the volunteering found in Chicago Latino neighborhoods was provided through churches (Hernandez et al., 2007).

Recent studies are beginning to explore the ways in which leaders within faith communities and other value-based civic institutions promote behaviors that can reduce risky behaviors as well as enhance hope, well-being, and educational attainment among youth (Boddie & Cnaan, 2006; Cnaan, 2006; Cnaan & Boddie, 2002; Cnaan, et al., 2006; Dilulio, 2002; Johnson et al., 2001; Wuthnow, 2004). Similarly, policy literature points to the importance of providing sustained mentoring and healthy opportunities for young people by increasing adult support and supervision. This is particularly important in urban communities, where faith-based organizations provide a significant source of moral leadership and guidance for youth.

Research Objectives: The current study builds upon this literature base by examining the various impacts of DVULI on urban youth leaders and their communities. As such, this study's research objectives are to: 1) Examine what elements of the DVULI program are making the greatest impact on participants and communities in order to maximize their influence and build social capital; 2) Understand variations across cities and across training cohorts, particularly related to cohort and community relationship networks; 3) Describe the DVULI program's strengths, areas for future improvement, and lessons learned.

Methods and Analysis: This mixed methods study includes survey data collected from graduates in all 20 cities where trainings were conducted, as well as focus group interviews in nine of those cities. Ten case study interviews added further depth to the focus groups but those findings will not be discussed in this paper.

Online Surveys. Working in conjunction with DVULI staff, researchers made a web-based survey available to all 389 DVULI graduates with a current address. Gift certificates (\$25) were provided for participation, yielding a 70% response rate, or 271 completed and valid surveys. Using Stata statistical software, researchers ran descriptive statistics such as frequencies, means, standard deviations, and cross tabulations. This report will primarily be describing the findings using percentages and qualitative content

analysis. However, future analyses will include ANOVAs and regressions to more clearly understand differences between groups.

Focus Groups. Researchers worked with DVULI staff to select nine cities across the nation where the focus groups would be conducted. Cities included Denver, Chicago, Grand Rapids, Philadelphia, Houston, Albuquerque, Orlando, San Diego, and Indianapolis. DVULI staff and researchers chose these cities to get a wide variety of perspectives from early, middle and later graduates while including regional variation. Researchers next developed an interview guide in conjunction with DVULI staff. Broad questions explored the impact of the DVULI training on the graduates' personal lives, ministry, and the communities that they served. The interview guide contained 17 questions regarding changes resulting from the Initiative across the following categories: 1) changes in knowledge and attitudes; 2) changes in values and beliefs; 3) changes in skills and behavior; 4) leadership paths; and, 5) DVULI and community relationships. Focus groups were organized by the former DVULI Program Director and conducted by the Principal Investigator, accompanied by a Graduate Assistant. A total of 76 people participated in these interviews, representing a broad cross-section of ages, genders, and ethnicities.

Digital recordings of all surveys were first transcribed and then loaded into a qualitative software package called QDA Miner. Next, two researchers (the Principal Investigator and a Graduate Assistant) used categories developed in the focus group interview guide to independently conduct initial coding to identify preliminary themes and key word categories. The researchers then met to discuss and reconcile their coding selections. Once all focus group comments had been coded, all comments were compiled into one large document, enabling researchers to compare comments across categories and cities. Finally, using the constant comparative method, researchers conducted axial coding to develop themes and sub-themes within each major category, across all focus group responses.

Findings: Demographics. Graduates from 20 cities who completed their training from 1998 – 2005 answered questions from the online survey, with an average of 14 people responding from each city. Two-

thirds of DVULI program participants were male, with ages ranging between 23 and 68 years and an average age of 42 years. About half (51.5%) of all respondents identified themselves as Black or African American, almost one-fourth (23.5%) said they were White or Caucasian, almost one-fifth (19.9%) described themselves as Latino or Hispanic, with the remainder selecting Multi-racial (2.6%), Asian/Pacific Islander (1.5%), Native American (.4%), or Other (1.1%). In addition, 42.7% of the respondents had been in professional ministry between one and ten years, with 37.4% in ministry between 11-20 years and 17.5% in professional ministry between 21-30 years. Less than three percent had been in ministry for more than 30 years. Because 30% of the survey respondents also participated in the focus groups, graduates in both groups had very similar demographic profiles.

Use of Skills. Graduates were trained in a variety of leadership principles, many of which were adapted from current management theory and practice for application in an urban Evangelical context. Survey results indicated that the vast majority of graduates were incorporating values such as balance, accountability, empowerment, interdependence, and leverage into their personal lives and ministries on a daily or weekly basis. The majority of graduates were also practicing the skills of personal assessment, collaboration, ministry assessment, systems thinking, scenario planning, resource networking, and asset mapping on a daily or weekly basis. Graduates were also required to develop a concrete, measurable plan of action to guide their personal and ministry development. Over 60% of graduates reported mostly or completely implementing their plan following graduation and 50% reported achieving their plan's goals, with another 43% who had somewhat achieved their plan's goals. These are reasonably high percentages given that many of the graduates had only completed their training in the past several years. Qualitative findings showed that the process of developing their plan of action had assisted them with defining the focus of their ministry and developing new strategies to meet ministry goals. For example, one program participant said:

"I think one way that the Initiative helped me be a better leader was to begin to not look at results in terms of head count or just numbers, but what kind of life changes were

happening in the kids ... and to begin to ask myself 'why does this work?' or 'why didn't it work?', and to begin to look at the bigger picture..."

It also influenced their personal lives by helping them to attain balance in the areas of family, self-care, and moderate living. One graduate stated:

"Prior to my training, my time was fully occupied by the church and its ministry followed by my job, my family and then finally myself. The DVULI initiative has helped me to seek balance in all of those areas with the starting point being my family!"

Vocational Impact. A primary goal of DVULI training was to help graduates to improve their ministries. Graduates responded to a series of questions relating to how DVULI training had helped them make those various improvements. As seen in Table 1, the large majority of graduates either agreed or strongly agreed that the Initiative had helped them improve in job performance, job satisfaction, and earning the respect of supervisors and colleagues. In addition, about half of all graduates agreed or strongly agreed that DVULI training had helped them to earn a better position and increase their personal income.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

Another primary goal of DVULI was to help participants reduce feelings of burnout within their youth leadership positions. Graduates were also asked whether the Initiative helped them to remain in ministry. Approximately 80% of all graduates either agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, with almost 70% stating that they had remained specifically in youth ministry either consistently or with some interruptions since completing DVULI training. Only 2.2% stated that they were not involved in any kind of ministry.

Developing Bonding Capital. As noted earlier, bonding capital takes place between similar people with strongly shared commitments like family, friends, and other similarly connected groups. To measure this form of social capital, DVULI graduates were first asked how many youth they ministered to in a typical six-month period, both before and after DVULI training. While numbers varied, graduates ministered to an average of 166 youth *prior* to the Initiative training. In contrast, they ministered to an average of 304 youth *after* DVULI training, an almost 50% increase. The DVULI Alumni Survey then questioned graduates about

how many individuals they had trained in a typical six-month period. A definition of training was not provided for respondents, but comments in the focus groups indicate that most training involved the use of the DVULI curriculum with both youth and adults. While 9.7% of the graduates did not train any individuals, 25% trained between one and ten individuals - with an average of 128 individuals trained per graduate.

Mentoring is another key component of the Initiative's goal of impacting urban youth by investing in their leaders. As DVULI empowers graduates, they are then expected to empower other individuals by developing their strengths and leadership abilities for the future. Mentoring others ensures that graduates are able to delegate responsibilities to others with the confidence that they will have the skills to succeed. This includes mentoring ministry partners as well as urban youth. As graduates complete the DVULI training, they are challenged to re-evaluate their roles as leaders and consider the impact of passing on their leadership skills in order to create lasting change within their communities.

The Alumni Survey asked graduates how many individuals they had mentored in the area of leadership development. While mentoring was not defined, it was clear that graduates believed this was a focused, time-consuming process that involved forming a meaningful relationship with a mentee. Focus group results indicated that graduates used DVULI values and skills when mentoring others (these results are described in the section below). Only 3.9% of the graduates had not mentored any individuals, and 66.4% had mentored between one to ten people - with an average of 10.6 individuals mentored per DVULI graduate. Focus group findings showed that graduates were able to describe a number of mentoring relationships, including mentoring others, having their own personal mentors, developing mentoring programs for youth to pass along DVULI values and skills, and developing mentoring experiences for their ministry teams. One program participant noted that:

"We have a puppet and drama team but we incorporate these Breakthrough Skills into it and the older ones get to mentor the younger ones. That's part of them not paying for the program, that's part of their way of paying back. They take what they learned and train younger [ones] so when [the older kids] go to college, the younger kids step up and keep rotating over and over..."

Another DVULI goal is to have graduates establish personal and ministry networks between other DVULI graduates in their own and other cities. This network creates opportunities to build bonding capital with each other as well as to develop bridging and linking capital to benefit the community. However, this objective is dependent on graduates making efforts to stay connected with each other. DVULI training sought to reinforce the need for collaborative relationships which can result in resource linkage, feedback and accountability between graduates, and opportunities for partnerships within communities.

Focus group findings confirmed that these relationships were being established and maintained. Graduates were able to talk specifically about how they stayed in touch with each other through telephone, emails and small groups. They also discussed difficulties they sometimes had maintaining that regular communication. Graduates' primary reasons for communication were to obtain personal and ministry support and mentoring, plan future projects, and to use each other as a resource linkage. The most common partnership activities included developing and implementing youth programs, programs for youth ministry workers, partnering with DVULI groups from other cities or groups from other organizations, and planning for future activities.

Developing Bridging Capital. Recalling that bridging capital implies horizontal connections between people who share similar economic status and political power, it is clear that DVULI training helped graduates to establish more horizontal connections across their communities in an attempt to broaden the scope and community engagement of their ministries. For example, the Alumni Survey asked graduates whether DVULI training had led them to greater involvement in a more specific variety of community development activities. As seen in Table 2, 76.1% of graduates agreed or strongly agreed that they were more involved in broad ministry networks, 78.0% were more involved in community development activities, and 72.0% were more involved in cross-denominational activities. A somewhat lower, but still substantial

percentage of graduates (62.4%) agreed or strongly agreed that they were more involved in volunteer activities and political and civic affairs (45.8%) within their communities. One graduate commented:

"I find myself trying to forge new partnerships on different levels...forging some relationships on the city-wide level where DeVos [DVULI] helped us to not just aimlessly do something. ...if you want to make an impact in your city, in your community, don't just randomly do a food pantry - find out if that's what's needed."

[Insert Table 2 about here]

The ultimate test of a program is whether it actually makes a measurable impact on the community. While it is difficult to measure ultimate impacts such as reductions in crime or poverty, a variety of shorter-term outcomes can be measured, including the development of new organizations or partnerships in the community. To measure this impact, graduates were asked how many projects, programs, or organizations they had developed in a typical six-month period. While 72.9% of the graduates had developed 1 to 5 projects, programs or organizations, 10% of them had not developed any – with an average of 3.7 programs per graduate. One program participant remarked:

"Right now the most impactful thing we are doing is another organization collaboration called 'Healthy Marriages, Healthy Relationships'. It serves low income parents and expecting parents to help them build relationships with each other and learn communication skills in ways that bless themselves and bless their children. And as of last week Thursday or so, in 2 ½ years, about 1050 participants that completed the program through that collaboration."

The DVULI Alumni survey also wanted to know how many organizations the graduates had partnered with to provide ministry or services. While 5.1% of the graduates had not partnered with any organizations, 55.5% had worked with between one to five organizations to provide ministry or service. However, graduates partnered with an average of 8.8 organizations, reflecting the higher number of partnerships created by a smaller number of graduates. Graduates partnered in areas such as after-school programs, sexual abstinence programs, and teen violence reduction programs.

Focus groups also showed many ways in which graduates developed new or improved community relationships. First, DVULI prepared graduates to apply networking skills and concepts to their own

ministry programs. The result revitalized some ministries, increased collaboration within organizations, and led to the creation of new projects. In addition, graduates were able to delegate project responsibilities to other ministry team members or agency members because of newly formed relationships.

Second, graduates described community outreach work that reached thousands of individuals. Many were able to secure grant money to invest in their neighborhoods while others were able to bring services that had been absent in urban communities through the collaborative networks they developed using DVULI skills. These graduates were able to expand their reach outside of their own ministry and into neighborhoods and communities because of the new or improved relationships that resulted from DVULI.

A recent graduate noted:

"We didn't necessarily have a thought about 'community' before the DeVos thing. It was simply about my little ministry, my little corner of ____ and ____ [street names omitted] and what I'm doing with these kids. And I didn't know what else was out there and I didn't think it was important.... But coming together with this group of people, the people in my city group, showed me how the city of Grand Rapids is so much bigger than my little corner. And I never had that perspective before."

Graduates in Grand Rapids went on to develop a new organization called Grand Rapids Initiative for Leaders (GRIL) (www.grileadership.com), which trains teen and adult youth leaders in DVULI values and skills.

Third, DVULI training caused a significant shift in thinking as far as collaborating with other denominations as well as generating a number of interdenominational collaborations. In addition, graduates described the synergy that resulted from multiple congregations coming together for one common purpose. They were also excited about the potential for a broader impact when denominational barriers were broken and a common goal was shared.

Finally, a large group of focus group participants described how the Initiative helped them move beyond racial, ethnic, and gender barriers. For many of the graduates, the Initiative was the first time they had ever had the opportunity to directly challenge their prejudices, including some they did not know

existed. As a result, their approach to ministry and leadership changed and they began focusing on collaborating and interacting with people from cultures and ethnicities other than their own. These graduates began placing a higher value on diversity and purposefully choosing ministry partners who represented other racial, ethnic, age, and gender groups. A program participant commented:

"That's where it has to start to become a reality - in our churches, our church leadership... think about what the organizations look like. And for me, I'm required to have an advisory board team and so it's helped me strategically place people in that position that look different than me - some are different gender and it's very different from the culture that I'm a part of, but you know I think that's part of becoming a diverse organization or feeling that that's important - is that leadership."

Developing Linking Capital. As noted earlier, linking capital is developed when vertical connections are established between underprivileged individuals and people in positions of power in official organizations. As mentioned previously, it is difficult to directly connect DVULI training activities to ultimate impacts within a community, such as reductions in crime or poverty. However, a variety of shorter-term impacts can be measured, including bringing new dollars into the community. To measure this impact, the survey first asked graduates how many grants they had brought into their or others' organizations following DVULI training. Although a substantial number (40.5%) of the graduates had not brought in any grants into their or others' organizations, 47.2% brought in one to five grants, for an average of 2.8 grants per person.

To better quantify these findings, the survey also asked how many dollars the graduates had actually helped raise in grants and or donations as a result of DVULI training. The overall amount the graduates helped raise was \$19 million, of which \$10.5 million came from seven large grants. However, even apart from the seven big grants, an average of approximately \$50,000 was raised per person. There were also 15 grants that were between \$100,000 and \$600,000, with typical grants between \$10,000 and \$100,000.

Discussion: Such findings highlight the commitment of graduates to expand the network of individuals who are involved in leadership within their communities. These influences extend the reach of the DVULI values and skills and make positive community impact more likely as a result. Training and mentoring

illustrates the bonding and bridging capital that graduates were able to help develop with people within their communities. As these relationships were strengthened through training and mentoring, those who were trained and mentored became more prepared to connect to other individuals and resources, thereby strengthening their churches and communities.

Such relationships help communities develop stronger social capital by connecting community members around common causes or activities. As new organizations and partnerships are formed, communities mobilize around social and community events. This often leads to discussion of community problems and concerns and leaders such as those trained in DeVos principles can help to move these concerns to concrete action.

The DVULI Initiative sought to equip graduates with networking skills that would increase not only their sense of mutual support but would also create a synergistic impact on the community. Through cross-collaboration with churches of differing faiths and community organizations, a community network that intersected across denominational barriers as well as barriers related to race, ethnicity, and gender could be established. The development of a community-wide network using skills and concepts learned from DVULI training could equip graduates to have an impact on not just their own church or agency but on the community or city as a whole.

Finally, grant applications and actual grant dollars and donations highlight the action of linking capital. By bringing in new dollars to their communities, graduates were able to link resources from outside the community to develop services and activities within the community in ways that created improvements.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice: Many of the faith-based programs currently under evaluation involve direct service provision to clients. However, leadership training programs such as the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative have not been sufficiently researched. Research must also determine whether such programs can be offered at a scope and scale that will produce a positive impact in urban communities with complex needs and challenges. Such training programs appear to offer increased

capacity development of a core group of leaders within a city, potentially leading to sustained impact in communities in areas such as reductions in high-risk behaviors, violence prevention, or development of after-school tutoring or recreation programs. Research efforts must focus on measuring the longer-term impacts of such leadership training programs, where changes are often diffused over leaders' multiple programs and services within the community. Researchers must also attempt to determine what level or number of participants within a community is ideal for producing social changes that are measurable and sustainable. Upcoming analyses will focus on ANOVA and regression analyses to better understand the differences that occurred between groups when controlling for age, gender, year of program graduation, number of years in ministry, paid vs. unpaid ministry, and city size. Preliminary percentage comparisons across these variables have already produced interesting differences but space constraints prevent us from presenting them in this paper.

Policy implications point to the importance of private philanthropy organizations in stimulating leadership development and training programs. While signature programs such as the DeVos Urban Leadership Initiative are well-funded and complex, such programs must ultimately be affordable and replicable across a wide variety of settings in order to effectively transform communities through networking, collaboration, and cooperative ministry activities. Next steps in evaluation include comparing a much shorter and less expensive DVULI training program with the standard model to determine what size, length, and program components offer the greatest impact. Such programs provide important support to policy efforts to meet youth needs in urban settings through the sustained development of networks of highly trained leaders who build faith-based solutions at the community level, particularly in programs with healthy choice and moral development components.

Practice implications include the importance of building the overall number and capacity of leaders in urban communities to mentor, train, and ultimately sustain youth-based initiatives in a variety of risk-reduction and healthy choice areas. In order to achieve such impacts, leadership training programs must

equip these leaders with personal and spiritual values and skills needed to enhance and sustain long-term training and involvement with urban youth, including collaboration with other city-based youth education and development programs.

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TABLE 1

<i>DVULI training has helped me to improve in:</i>	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
Job Performance	1.5	1.5	7.5	44.4	45.1
Job Satisfaction	1.9	5.0	17.2	41.6	34.4
Earning the Respect of Supervisors	2.4	4.8	26.3	33.5	33.1
Earning the Respect of Colleagues	1.1	3.8	18.0	42.9	34.1

TABLE 2

DVULI training has led me to greater involvement in...					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
...broad ministry networks	0.4	3.7	19.9	37.5	38.6
...community development activities	0.4	3.7	17.9	48.5	29.5
...cross-denominational activities	0.4	4.5	23.2	36.0	36.0
...volunteer work in my community	0.4	6.8	30.5	40.6	21.8
...political and civic affairs	1.1	14.1	38.9	29.4	16.4