



**University and Community Engagement-Classes to Promote Youth Leadership**

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## University and Community Engagement-Classes to Promote Youth Leadership

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*Brian Davis*

Austin, Texas is one of the fastest growing cities in the United States, with current estimates of over 150 people moving to the city PER DAY. Once known merely as a quiet college town and the capital of the state of Texas with 150,000 residents, it's now a high-tech, high-wage, high-rent city and the 11th largest in the U.S. with a population in the range of 1,000,000. The indigenous or "nearly indigenous" residents are proud of their slogans "Keep Austin Weird," and "The Live Music Capital of the World," which harken to the days of the Armadillo World Headquarters and the migration of "hippies" to the city in the late '60s and early '70s. On any given night of the week live music performances take place in large internationally recognized venues like Austin City Limits or lesser known but iconic joints like Hole in the Wall. Annual music festivals South By Southwest (SXSW) in the spring and Austin City Limits (ACL) festival in the fall bring in millions of dollars for the local economy.

As the U.S. economy has transitioned from manufacturing to high-tech, the diaspora from the Rust Belt cities of the Midwest and Northeast has created an economic and population boom in more hospitable climes. As members of the new economy flock to cities like Austin from the East and West Coasts, real estate prices swell, residential and commercial development ensues, and overall economic growth accelerates. Low taxes (at least the lack of a personal state income tax), sweet-heart deals between local and/or state government and corporations that eliminate most all taxes as incentives to out-of-state companies to relocate, developing transportation infrastructure, and a large pool of local tech-savvy graduates have created a dynamic city with seemingly endless growth potential. While the prosperous "skilled" jobs grow, the need for construction workers required to build new residences and office buildings, and the unskilled labor required to fill other positions rise

exponentially. As we see in other high growth areas in the U.S., many of these semi-skilled and unskilled jobs are filled by eager immigrants, both documented and un-documented. What makes that population migration even more explosive in cities like Austin is the close proximity to Mexico, and the seemingly endless supply of people leaving that failed state in search of jobs, security, and some semblance of stability, safety, and future prosperity. The accessibility, 234 miles to the Mexican border, to Austin provided by Interstate 35 makes it an even more convenient target.

Texas has a state constitution that requires the bicameral legislature meet only on odd numbered years (i.e. 2013, 2015) and is limited by law to regular sessions of 140 days. While that system seems like a part-time presence in the city, the shadow of full-time state government is everywhere in Austin. Both elected and appointed state government employees are here year round, and they make up a significant percentage of the local population and economy. However, at times it may seem as if the attention to the activities of state government are rivaled by another local institution: The University of Texas.

Known by its nickname "The 40 acres," UT is a landlocked university in the middle of Austin, across the street to the north of the State Capital and its surrounding buildings. Once considered a good quality regional institution, UT has seen its prestige and reputation grow nationally and globally, and is now considered by most to be one of the top public universities in the US with a student population around 50,000 along with 24,000 faculty and staff.

While many "college towns" have strong efforts to coordinate "town and gown" initiatives, cooperation in economic, social, and cultural considerations are much more complex in Austin, as the size of the city as well as the history of The University present unique considerations. For

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## University and Community Engagement

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many Austinites living on the east side of town, traditionally known as the neighborhood occupied by the city's African American and Hispanic populations, the UT Tower and the mammoth Darrell K Royal football stadium were merely symbols of white privilege and dominance. The roster of the 1969 national champion Longhorn football team did not have a single African American student-athlete. A year later, the Longhorns were again named national champions after their defeat of the Arkansas Razorbacks, but by then the team had added the first African American to ever suit-up for the Horns, a young lineman by the name of Julius Wittier. Once that barrier was broken, each additional year throughout the decade saw more and more African American students and student-athletes attending UT, with the likes of running back Roosevelt Leaks becoming the Longhorns first African American member of the All-American Football Team in 1973 and fellow running back Earl Campbell winning the Heisman Trophy in 1977. Undoubtedly their success help to change the attitudes of white fans, alumni, and students, but also the perception of non-white Austin towards The University of Texas.

### **Using University Resources for Community Engagement**

Professor Michael Lauderdale, the Clara Pope Willoughby Centennial Professor in Criminal Justice at the UT School of Social Work, and Fred Ligarde, retired FBI agent and Austin resident, one of the founding members of the Greater Austin Crime Commission, established in 1997 to "support Central Texas law enforcement, raise public awareness about crime prevention programs, and promote a cooperative and coordinated community anti-crime effort," saw the needed to promote community engagement for youth success. The GACC membership includes business, civic, and education leaders throughout Austin and Travis County, Texas. During a GACC meeting in 1999, Dr. Lauderdale and Mr. Ligarde hatched the idea of creating a program that could use students and staff from UT to reach out to at-risk middle school students.

According to most educators and law enforcement personnel, that pre-teen age group is the most vulnerable to recruitment by criminal gangs and other anti-social behaviors. In 2000, the Longhorn Leaders Program began with a small class of university students who met weekly with students at Pearce Middle School. Pearce was chosen because of its large enrollment of African American and Hispanic students from lower socio-economic families. According to the principal, very few parents attended the "Back to School" night that all Austin schools conduct at the beginning of each school year. When word reached the community that students from the Longhorn Leaders would be attending, including student-athletes, hundreds of parents came on that Monday night in September, 2000 to hear what they had to say. The crowd was so large that some had to wait outside of the school's cafeteria as a result of the unexpected attendance. At that very moment, it was apparent that the course and subsequent engagement with the community was a strong and viable way to communicate and promote civic and educational cooperation, and that the message to the middle school students was an important one.

As each semester progressed, the students, Dr. Lauderdale, and the various supporters within the greater Austin community began to see a positive reputation develop for a program that was like no other; The students from The University of Texas, the flagship of public higher education in the 2nd largest state in the U.S., were actually engaged in the lives of young boys and girls from a part of town so often neglected by "the 40 acres." While this was by no means the first University effort to promote interaction with staff and students from UT with the community at large, it was unique in several ways: First and foremost, it is designed to be a continuation of engagement. Often, and particularly in the world of college athletics, student athletes will perform community service. What makes the Longhorn Leaders so much different is the consistent development of positive and appropriate relationships between college students and the young students from the targeted schools. The college students present their

individual “stories” each week, giving a glimpse of their own personal background as well as examples of how they’ve each overcome their own set of obstacles. The presentations are powerful: so many young students look upon college students, and especially student athletes, as having had perfect lives. When they hear college students talk about their own personal experiences, which can cover almost any challenge from being raised by a teenage mother, having to fight off gangs, drugs, or any of a myriad of negative choices, the middle school students realize that they’re not alone. Maybe they too have chance to break “the cycle” of poverty and achieve what had been considered unachievable. Some of the most moving essays I’ve read have come from the middle school students who bravely express their own deep and personal fears and problems yet point to the positive influence of the Longhorn Leaders as giving them hope and encouragement.

For the college students who study, learn, and participate through the class and program, there are long-lasting results as well. For many of the student athletes, their own identity shifts from merely associating themselves as an athlete to the realization that they have much more to offer. Many have reflected on the class/program as a moment of clarity in their own personal development, and they have taken the lessons learned as a Longhorn Leader and applied them to their professional careers as well as their growing families.

The Longhorn Leaders program is now recognized as an extremely important and viable conduit to reach Austin Independent School District (AISD) students by not only the school system, but the city of Austin, Austin Police Department, the Texas State Senators and House Members, and the Greater Austin Crime Commission have all publicly praised the program for its positive influence on the target population. Admittedly this is a micro-view to a much larger local, state, and national problem. However, the individual connection between middle school students from at-risk environments and the Longhorn Leader representatives creates

an undeniably successful model for the utilization of existing resources (UT students and staff) to the betterment of the community at large.

### **Conclusion**

There are over 300 colleges and universities that compete in the top division of the NCAA, and over 120 the mirror the size of UT’s athletic program as members of the upper echelon of football at the collegiate level. Similarly, the impact of those schools AND their respective student athletes on the local community can be as significant. The leadership developed among those student athletes cannot and does not happen in a vacuum: their potential impact on local communities, particularly those in socio-economic disadvantaged neighborhoods and schools can be immense. As immigration patterns change our communities, an even greater need for leadership at this level is required. As we’ve seen young people affect change on a national level historically (voting rights, wars, social unrest), localizing those efforts can have lasting benefits seen not just by the middle school students who are effected directly, but the community as a whole benefits from a more stable population.