

“An Open Mesh of Possibilities”:

Engaging Disability Studies as a Site of Activist and Leadership Possibilities

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This article offers a case study of the development and implementation of a free activist and leadership course for members of the community planning on running for elected office. The article describes how the course was developed, including an explanation of the partnership between the Latino Leadership Institute (LLI) and the University of Central Florida's United Faculty of Florida (UCF-UFF), which resulted in the creation of an Orlando LLI chapter. The Electoral Activism and Leadership Academy (EALA), as the course was called, was motivated by two disability methodologies: first, a “madness narrative methodology” (Fields), wherein “representations are fragmented and non-rational,” even “resisting objectivity, linearity, and rational progression,” and secondly, a “nothing about us without us” methodology (Fields), which advocates the need for open discussions about action with populations who would be affected by such action. These methodologies helped reduce anxiety around the subject, offering a space for instructors and participants to participate as and when they could, share their stories, and get advice. This paper demonstrates that when oppressive cultural and political climates fragment bodies and identities of marginalized people, that fragmentation becomes the catalyst for opportunities of resistance. These fragmentations ultimately are representative of the cracks in oppressive systems, giving rise to the urgent need for the inclusivity of underrepresented or neglected perspectives, voices, and bodies to achieve everyday rhetorical resistance.

In the wake of the election of Donald Trump, campaign training programs like Ready to Run, New American Leaders, and Running Start saw an upsurge in interest in its training sessions, with some applications for participation going up by 87% (Kamerick n.p.). These training sessions are largely lessons in how to evaluate, enter, and navigate the rhetorical situations in a given time or place. The Campaign Workshop describes these trainings as “one of those must do decisions for potential candidates. Whether it is picking the right office to run for, or how to create a contrast between you and your opponent, most folks need help need help to make early choices in their political career” (Fuld n.p.). Michael Sheridan, Jim Ridolfo, and Anthony J. Michel’s kairotic approach to public rhetoric necessitates this kind of attention to kairos – “the opportune moment” – which makes visible the options, possibilities, and constraints in any given (public) rhetorical situation (xxiv). Similarly, Cynthia Fields’ madness narrative methodology opens up opportunities of understanding and representation that might otherwise have been (dis)missed by resisting a linear movement toward tidy, rational conclusions (Hitt and Garrett 7). The implications of a madness narrative of public rhetoric manifests in a unique way for the community: spurred by the narratives of those most impacted by their respective political climates, a growing number of citizens are seeking ways to be more involved, but the insistence on linear, one-size-fits-all trainings – that is, trainings designed for people who have the financial, emotional, and even physical stability – run the risk of alienating the variety of roles and perspectives needed in the political and public sphere.

The Latino Leadership Institute’s (LLI) Electoral Activism and Leadership Academy (EALA) is one of the campaign training initiatives designed with this potential risk in mind. This article will offer a case study of the development of this leadership course that grew out of a partnership between LLI and the United Faculty of Florida’s University of Central Florida chapter (UFF-UCF). From the perspective of my role as member on the LLI’s Florida Advisory Board, this article will demonstrate how our attention to the varying needs, capabilities, and potentialities of citizen participation resulted in a course that manifested three disability methodologies: first, a commitment to interdependency; secondly, a “nothing about us without us” approach, which advocates the need for open discussions about action with populations who would be affected by such action

(Hitt and Garrett 8); and lastly, a “madness narrative methodology,” wherein “representations are fragmented and non-rational,” even “resisting objectivity, linearity, and rational progression” (Hitt and Garrett 7). These methodologies helped reduce anxiety around creating an inclusive space for all interested parties, which would later come to serve a space for instructors and participants to participate as and when they could, share their stories, and get advice. Foregrounding the goals of “ethical representation and reciprocity” central to madness narratives and disability studies in general (Fields 43), the EALA created a space that asked everyone in the room to become more self-reflexive, interrogating our own positionalities as citizens, our interdependent relationships, and the ways in which we understand our role as citizen activists.

I will begin by providing the context of the partnership between UFF-UCF and LLI, including my own involvement as an LLI Advisory Board member. Then, I will tell the story of how the partnership developed and the ELA course that came out of it. Through this narrative, I will highlight how interdependence, nothing about us without us, and madness methodologies shaped the inclusiveness and success of the course. Ultimately, this case study demonstrates the degree to which community/university partnerships tend to be understood as transactional relationships, and how centering disability methodologies provides unique opportunities for inclusivity, engagement, and empowerment that avoids potential pitfalls of transactional work among groups. Furthermore, centering disability in the context of labor and organizing strategies transforms the relationship that members have to their work and the communities that benefit from this work.

THE PARTNERSHIP

The Latino Leadership Institute (LLI) is a non-partisan, nonprofit 501(c)3 that “offers comprehensive and empowering classes on the electoral process and civic activism to promising and inspiring minority students for FREE” (Latino Leadership Institute n.p.). LLI offers two courses: Public Policy, and the Electoral Activism and Leadership Academy (EALA). The EALA is marketed as a

hands-on training in the following areas of electoral campaigns: petitioning, campaign finance law, messaging, public speaking, debate, media relations, social media, base-building, fundraising, campaign management and campaign planning. Our teachers each have over 20 years of experience in electoral politics and community organizing in New York City and the United States. (Latino Leadership Institute n.p.).

Graduates of New York's EALA have gone on to a variety of careers in politics and organizing throughout the country.

Motivated by the changing demographic of Central Florida – specifically, the estimated 80,000 Puerto Ricans who have migrated to Central Florida between 2014 and 2016 (qtd in Estades and Diaz) – LLI President Jamie Estades reached out to nonprofit organizations from the Orlando area, including Jobs with Justice and the United Faculty of Florida (UFF), in order to organize the local Latinx community to increase civic participation. This goal caught the attention of Florida House Representative Amy Mercado, who, in early 2016, contacted UFF-UCF President Scott Launier regarding a potential partnership between LLI and UFF-UCF. Mercado had been inquiring around the central Florida area looking for space to host the EALA, with the hope that this session's success would solidify the creation of the Florida chapter of LLI, the first outside of the original chapter in New York. Launier agreed to have UFF-UCF host the space, and the EALA began that spring on the University of Central Florida's campus.

Launier's decision to have UFF-UCF partner with LLI was motivated by the shared values between the two groups. UFF-UCF's mission is "to protect and support the practice of our academic professions, including teaching, research, and service" (United Faculty of Florida n.p.). Furthermore, UFF-UCF makes clear its commitment to "ensure UCF's campuses are safe and hospitable environments for all students, employees, residents and visitors. UCF is a community that continually strives to honor the dignity of all people" (United Faculty of Florida n.p.). UFF-UCF membership and presence on and off campus is shaped by this charge to honor the dignity of all people as a way to support the practice of academia. The work of UFF-

UCF’s Diversity and Equality Committee, for example, is guided by the need for faculty to build networks of support and resistance in order to achieve their professional goals. Similarly, LLI seeks to “educate, empower, engage and mobilize the civic power of...growing minority communities” because “as Americans, we should celebrate the increasing diversity...across the nation. It makes us stronger people” (Estades and Diaz n.p.). This attention to empowering and engaging groups of people into networks of civic power is not at all unlike UFF-UCF’s own mission to do the same for communities both on and off campus. It’s not a surprise, therefore, that the partnership between LLI and UFF-UCF came so easily.

Based on the New York chapter’s EALA course, the first EALA in Florida featured eight classes that outlined the process of running for an elected office or managing a political campaign. The course introduces participants to the electoral process through a chronological account of creating a campaign, including how to mobilize and build a base, manage finance, and develop effective political messaging. Ultimately, this course created opportunities for participants to become more politically engaged and active by providing an opportunity to enact change at all levels of the electoral process. Most importantly, just as in New York, this course would be free of charge and open to all who were interested.

The spring class proved to be a success – two participants went on to win their elections, including that of a County Commissioner. Changes in leadership throughout the progression of the course – including the eventual promotion of Launier as the director of the Florida LLI chapter – gave rise to the need of an Advisory Board for the Florida chapter, should the partnership continue. In the fall of 2016, Launier created the board to begin constructing a new version of the EALA course for the spring of 2017. By the end of 2016, UFF-UCF was the primary partner of LLI, with 75% of the Advisory Board associated with UFF-UCF, myself included.

TOWARD INTERDEPENDENCY

The opportunity to partner with LLI, as I have demonstrated, came from a mutual desire to push back against the organizational impetus to be represented by “a ‘voice of one’ – one mission, one philosophy,

one leader” (Stewart and Alrutz n.p.) and instead work toward shared values through a variety of voices, perspectives, and leaders. In the wake of the success of the first EALA course, the Advisory Board began thinking of ways to respond to this idea of bringing in a variety of perspectives specific to Central Florida while at the same time honoring the work that the early partnership of LLI and the central Florida community had already done. We worried, however, that if we tried to articulate our own identity outside of LLI’s, the partnership might become transactional: LLI and UFF-UCF each has something the other needs, so we work together in order to exchange these resources within existing power structures. “Although devoid of commitment,” Stewart and Alrutz explain, “a successful transactional relationship will satisfy some of the needs of all parties. Within a university-community partnership, this often means that each party simply uses the other to meet an immediate need, and then breaks off the relationship when their needs are exhausted” (n.p.). In this context, the Advisory Board wanted to avoid seeing the New York chapter of LLI creating the curriculum for UFF-UCF to provide space and the personnel necessary to deliver the curriculum. Both partners move toward the goal of empowering their communities, but what the Advisory Board looked for was a way to make the curriculum more relevant and kairotic to the Central Florida area. In fact, the first EALA was taught almost exclusively by instructors from New York, who sent different instructors for each class. When they did not send instructors from New York – either because the Florida chapter shifted the class focus or instructors were just not available – they chose volunteers from local community partners to cover the class. One such volunteer neglected to show up, forcing that week’s class to be cancelled. Another week saw a community partner instrumental in bringing LLI to Florida volunteer the class, but on the caveat that they teach the Power Points developed by the New York chapter. This volunteer then solicited other volunteer instructors to cover what New York expected us to fill. In this way, the Florida chapter of the EALA didn’t want to feel compelled to teach civic engagement strategies from the perspective of instructors almost exclusively from the New York chapter, nor rely on their availability to teach the lessons.

Because the Advisory Board was so faculty-heavy, what soon became apparent was the approach we were taking to this partnership.

Usually, this kind of university-based partnership with a community organization takes the form of a service-learning experience, and as faculty familiar with teaching such courses, we deployed much of the same strategies as we might for our own service-learning course curriculum. We wanted participants to take on the role of volunteers in local elections, become involved in local campaigns to see how the process worked, and graduate from the EALA with their campaign effectiveness as a mark of success. But, as I have demonstrated, this was not the purpose of the EALA: participants were not responsible for connecting their learning to a local campaign or organization in order to complete the course. Stewart and Alrutz write,

Service-learning asks students to address a genuine community need through volunteer service that is connected explicitly to the academic curriculum of their academic course through ongoing, structured reflections designed for maximizing a deep understanding of course content, addressing genuine community needs with impact, and developing learners’ sense of civic responsibility.

While I don’t mean to devalue or suggest the ineffectiveness of a service-learning model, I do think that it is important to recognize, as the Advisory Board did, that in this particular partnership, our goal was not to tie back participants’ work in these trainings to any kind of academic course content, or even to develop participants’ civic responsibility. The participants of the EALA were not our students, and by coming to the EALA, they had already developed that sense of responsibility. Furthermore, the community need required that participants’ understanding of the content they were provided manifested outside of the restricted space of the classroom.

The key to addressing our reliance on this service-learning model was recognizing the dynamics and function of the LLI and UFF-UCF partnership and how it came to be. When Representative Amy Mercado reached out to Launier, UFF-UCF’s president, they had never met before. When Launier asked Mercado to clarify how she knew to contact him, or why she chose to contact him, Mercado invoked the name of a mutual friend, a community organizer with the Central Labor Council and President of the Central Florida chapter of

the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement. Under Launier's leadership, UFF-UCF began showing up at Central Labor Council meetings, building relationships and offering support to other labor unions in the area. Thus when Mercado invoked the name of a trusted partner, Launier acted on the partnership, demonstrating the degree to which UFF-UCF recognizes how the success and sustainability of each community organization was built on the relationships it has with other organizations.

Because this partnership developed out of a network of established, reciprocal relationships across the community, our partnership was already in the position to resist traditional understandings of community-university public involvement. Our service-learning models that we depended on characterized our understanding of our relationships as reciprocal. Kendall defines reciprocity as "the exchange of both giving and receiving between the server and the person or group being served." This exchange "avoids the traditionally paternalistic, one-way approach to service in which one person or group has resources which they share 'charitably or 'voluntarily' with a person or group that lacks resources" (21-22). While reciprocity aims to avoid this hierarchy between the server and the served, it is not invulnerable to the power dynamics that come along with hierarchies. Part of the reason for this, Oldfield argues, rests on the "assumption that projects can be mutually beneficial, but without an empirical or conceptual analysis of how this mutuality is constituted" (270). In other words, even though the LLI and UFF-UCF partnership was created from a series of reciprocal relationships, without an examination of what is to be exchanged and the roles each group would play in the server-served dynamic, the partnership risks rehearsing the same power inequalities or privileges that both groups are trying to disrupt.

Against this backdrop, LLI's Florida Advisory Board made a decision to move away from notions of service and any implication that UFF-UCF would exert power on behalf of a deficient or incapable LLI or Central Florida community. Instead, the board decided to look back at how it all began, and moved ahead with interdependency at the fore. We took on a social justice-based approach to the partnership, which repositions the understanding of reciprocity as "an

expression of values, service to others, community development and empowerment, which determines the purpose, nature, and process of social educational exchange between learners, students, and the people they serve” (Stanton 67). Stewart and Alrutz mark this shift as indicative of a transformative relationship as opposed to a reciprocal one, wherein the relationship is “predicated on a willingness to reflect on one’s own practices and approaches to issues” (n.p.). They continue:

As the name implies, change is central to transformative relationships. [...] The organic nature of transformative relationships often allows for unexpected insight, creativity, excitement, and/or transformation for all involved. Transformative partnerships ultimately have greater impacts because partners are able to combine their resources to address mutually defined problems in more dynamic and comprehensive ways. (n.p.)

While there is no doubt that LLI and UFF-UCF demonstrated a willingness to reflect on the values and practices of their respective organizations, change was not the primary impetus to drive the two organizations together. The impetus, I believe, was an opportunity to empower the community through a social justice-based methodology that came out of the compulsion to protect and empower those with whom we were interdependent. I mean to suggest here that in order for a transformative relationship to work in a university-community partnership, the relationships must move beyond reciprocity and towards interdependency.

Interdependency creates the space for “unexpected insight, creativity, excitement, and/or transformation” that characterizes transformative relationships (Stewart and Alrutz n.p.). These spaces generate and flourish the ideas, identities, and capabilities that have the potential to transform goals, self-interests, and institutions. For example, the EALA is advertised as an *academy*, that is, an institution dedicated to higher learning, one that the Oxford English Dictionary frames as a bridge between a school and a college or university (OED). UFF-UCF’s mission uniquely situates the organization as one who seeks to build bridges between the community and university, making the partnership between the two appropriate and generative for both

groups involved. Yet how this partnership would manifest through the support of the EALA and its participants largely depended on each group's willingness to deny the existence of these bridges: the success of the EALA needed to be contingent on the function of the partnership as interdependent, rather than two independent entities coming together for this training.

This is not to suggest that this partnership is passive because of the acknowledgement of interdependency, and thus finds meaning just through the act of acknowledging the skills and resources of each. "[I]f interdependency is a fact of my being," Jung writes, "then I might persuade myself to believe I'm helping to build and sustain systems of ethical relation just by *being*. This fundamental passivity of rhetorical agency, while theoretically interesting, doesn't suffice when it comes to political projects, because politics isn't passive" (107). The existence of the EALA is a response to the call for intervention on different political levels, and accomplishes this through the recognition and "imagining [of] how our intellectual work...emerges and survives *interdependently*" (Jung 106-7). In other words, the LLI and UFF-UCF partnership was not created out of a choice to be interdependent¹, but rather out of a choice to recognize the degree to which our existences – the university, the community, and even UFF-UCF and LLI – are dependent on one another.

INSIDE THE EALA: NOTHING ABOUT US WITHOUT US

The EALA provided the space to explore these interdependencies while at the same time offering strategies and opportunities to participate and enact change in the community, specifically at the level of an elected position. This kind of attention to interdependency invokes Jung's call for interdependence to be understood as both an "ethic for creating more accessible intellectual publics" as well as a pedagogy (114). Pedagogy, for Jung, is "a complex open system constituted by nested relations of reciprocity [that] can help us identify elements on multiple, sometimes seemingly disconnected, levels for purposes of sustaining those relations we deem ethical and intervening in those we do not" (114). Narrative characterized the

1 Jung reminds us that "being able to conceive of [choosing to be interdependent] can be a marker of privilege, but it can also signify a belief in one's own insignificance: if I believe nothing I do matters, then I'm also likely to believe no one would choose to depend on me" (112).

pedagogy of the 2017 EALA, opening up spaces in order to maximize on all the interdependent relationships in the room. With the success of the 2016 EALA, the Florida LLI chapter began to develop a positive reputation among the local political community, compelling UFF-UCF to become more active and aware of the significance of building relationships with local politicians by showing up in spaces where we could meet and support them. In return, many people associated with the local political community offered to support the next round of the EALA in any way they could.

With input from local politicians, the LLI Florida Advisory Board became keenly aware of the need to push against asking instructors from academia to volunteer (as been the practice of the New York chapter), and instead ask those who expressed interest from the political community. Because it was the lived experiences of the potential instructors that made their participation so invaluable, the LLI Florida Advisory Board decided to ask instructors to use their assigned class as a place to reflect on their experiences as the primary way to convey their information. To articulate the role we wanted the instructors to fill – not to treat the course as an academic class, but rather a space to share expertise for the sake of strengthening the local community – we asked potential instructors to “use...actual stories and examples. What didn’t you know the first time that you thought you did, or that you couldn’t have known, or that you learned?” Jones and Walton argue that narrative provides the most effective way to navigate structures because “they must consider their *relative* positioning” in order to “see themselves and their work as relational” (13). Each weekly lesson, then, was guided by narrative, challenging students to apply the concepts they were learning within their own political and personal context. Because the curriculum for each class comes from New York and are relatively brief and vague, the LLI Florida Advisory Board made sure to let instructors know that they had control over what content should be covered in their assigned class, which inevitably led to courses taking the form of 3-hour story sessions. The power of invoking narrative in this course reflects Arnett’s observation that when people are invited into or acknowledge a narrative structure that they are living in, they “situate themselves within a story of a community” (499). In this way, the instructors who came in taught the course as a process

of identifying relationships – those to cultivate, those to create, and those to end – as the crux of running a campaign.

Furthermore, every instructor that was brought in identified as a Latinx, and made that identification central to their experience of the political campaigns they were a part of. In this way, instructors who worked on successful (and sometimes unsuccessful) campaigns used storytelling as a way to create a context, insist on it, and demonstrate the power of a campaign for a minority group by a minority candidate. The effectiveness of such an approach echoes Obermark's and Walter's rhetorical theory based on the "nothing about us without us" slogan of the disability activist movement, which calls for "a more nuanced understanding of a dismissed group of rhetors" (64). Privileging the narratives that the instructors bring to the course centralizes the bodies and experiences of everyone in attendance, and provides new ways of recognizing and naming systemic racism and other forms of oppression that serve as unique barriers for Latinx involvement in the electoral process. Fernandez also argues that privileging narratives in such a way create spaces for "race and other socially constructed categories [to be] at the center of analysis," resisting a view of "race as peripheral or incidental to the experiences of people of color" (48). Invoking experiences in these classes served as springboards for the discussion in each class, creating an entry point for students to find commonalities, get advice, and see the possibilities for social action. More significantly, it created space for reflection on how interdependent their relationships were. By sharing stories, the Latinx instructors and participants find language to articulate oppression, but more importantly, how to find and use their agency to resist this oppression through the support networks they were building in each class.

Furthermore, the EALA's commitment to interdependency and the notion of "nothing about us without us" extended to the participants. Each class instructor attended to the relation of the interdependent systems that brought everyone together as a basis for conversation, action, and conceptions of new ways to move through the community as active participants. For example, a session early in the course had no instructor lined up. The week prior, a participant who had taken the course previously offered to step in and teach the next week's

lesson. In doing so, the participants were able to see what Jung calls a “system of reciprocity” in action, demonstrating how everyone’s own experience and presence in the course “are making structural interventions that help build and sustain a system of reciprocity that is the condition of possibility for our intellectual work” (114). This participant’s willingness and interest to contribute in such a way demonstrates the energy that can come from an interdependent community of learning that connects expertise, knowledge, and experiences to one another, and together forms an enhanced understanding of their role in the community.

This participant’s shift in role – effectually from student to teacher, and then back to student again – reflected the EALA’s intentional move to go beyond reciprocity and instead see interdependency as a condition for the possibility of its existence. For the EALA, courses are dependent on the involvement of past members, whether through their willingness to advertise or volunteer. What’s more, the shifting natures of the roles of all involved speak to a learning environment that resists more classic forms of pedagogy and classroom learning. Jung calls for a “politics of interdependency” in the classroom, forcing recognition of how interdependency allows us to “begin to take up our ethical obligation to help sustain relations that in turn help to sustain us” (102). For the EALA, taking up ethical obligations meant holding one another accountable to the community. As I have mentioned previously, the EALA is a nonpartisan effort for community involvement in the electoral process; how to take on a role as a candidate or a campaign manager was introduced to participants as taking on the trust of your community.

I call on the “nothing about us without us” methodology here in order to demonstrate the unique power of the LLI Florida’s EALA: with its focus on empowering marginalized communities, all participants are taught the process of social change through stories that run counter to the master narrative and the socially constructed nature of what it means to be socially active. Just as Sullivan and Martin remind us “to decide what to do next is to ask what stories you are in,” the EALA’s insistence on narrative provided a way for its participants to identify the stories they were in, and what stories they wanted to be a part of (206). Indeed, central to Obermark and Walter’s “nothing

about us without us” methodology is the work to “write *with*... rather than just *about*,” therefore invoking narrative in this way allows participants to learn how to write *within* the stories they find themselves in, as opposed to writing themselves *into* an unfamiliar – and often unwelcoming – story (63).

MADNESS NARRATIVE: INSIDE THE EALA AND BEYOND

For instructors of the EALA, creating, identifying, and holding yourself accountable to your community is central to any winning election campaign. Using narrative as the mechanism by which these courses move further demonstrates an attention to accessibility that, I argue, is central to the success of the course. In this way, it is access that drives the course; narrative, then, is the manifestation of that access. Simmons and Grabill remark that

the design of civic information must allow for multiple entry points, multiple types of questions and multiple angles of investigation to allow citizens to invent usable knowledge from the available information. Providing a single narrative of information does not allow for these explorations. Without the ability to invent and produce usable knowledge from available information, full participation in civic issues becomes unlikely. (434)

This attention to multiple entry points is crucial within the EALA: the instructors we recruited were from a variety of affiliations, political parties, and experiences. One way in which multiple entry points, questions, and angles of investigation were incorporated into the lessons was through a madness narrative methodology, which allowed instructors and participants “an opportunity to understand the world in non-rational ways,” ways that insist on pushing against what is the “right way” to teach community involvement (Hitt and Garrett 7).

The mission of LLI is “to empower Latinos and other minorities by increasing their participation in the democratic process. This is accomplished by training, organizing and mobilizing leaders into an agenda that reflects their aspirations and values.” There are two noticeable trends in this goal that LLI has set out for themselves: one, to increase participation in the democratic process, and two, to

mobilize citizens through education. Both goals speak to Cintron’s understanding of democracy as entwined with *topoi*, which he defines as “storehouses of social energy” that “organize our sentiments, beliefs, and actions in the lifeworld” (101). Aristotle defines *topoi* as part of rhetorical invention that categorizes the relationships among ideas. This idea of *topos* as “places to find things” becomes a powerful concept when considering *topos* as the “social energy” that moves through a space that organizes “actions in the lifeworld.” Madness narratives thrive on these “places to find things,” because it is through these unpredictable spaces and moments that usable knowledge is generated.

While centered on each week’s theme, the stories shared in the space of the EALA took on a life of their own; in many ways, the role of the instructor was to share his or her experiences and clarify information as the class went on. Because the perspectives of the instructors were so diverse – as were the experiences that they brought to the course – there was no way for us to articulate a lesson plan or strategies outside of the goal for the individual class he or she was teaching. In this way, we viewed the course as entry into a larger narrative about social change and participation, leaving room for the possibility of no real orderly conclusion. For example, many instructors were part of unsuccessful campaigns, and almost all instructors used Hillary Clinton’s 2016 Presidential campaign to reveal the very real possibilities of following logical, rational, and traditional moves in developing and delivering a campaign, but still not winning it. Because the real experiences the instructors brought to the classes left open the possibility – and value – of failure, the LLI Florida Advisory Board grappled with the conclusion of the course. Do we end it with a class about what to do after you win your campaign? Do we end it with a course on developing a final election plan? What about those whose experience in the course showed them that they are not suited to run for office? What is the logical end to a course on becoming more civically engaged? These questions led us to heed Fields’ call for a “madness narrative methodology,” wherein participants and storytellers can “construct the knowledge derived from...experiences in a way that does not follow a linear, argument-driven progression that seeks rational conclusions” (44). While the “rational conclusion” of the EALA would ostensibly be the creation of or participation in effective campaigns, not every participant of the EALA has the tools or resources necessary to do this. With these

limitations in mind, we communicated the course goals in such a way as to resist and push back against traditional characteristics of academic practices, what Hitt and Garrett describe as “objectivity, linearity, and rational progression” (7). There was no way to feasibly capture everything that one would need to know in order to win an election – particularly given the subjective nature of all of the choices and reactions associated with a campaign – thus relying on the experts to share their stories felt like the most effective strategy we could offer.

Following the lead of the instructors’ approach to delivering content, LLI Florida quickly saw the impossibility of maintaining New York’s initial course progression and description:

- **Campaign Finance** | Learn the technical nuts and bolts of campaign finance, including important rules and regulations.
- **Becoming a Candidate/Petitioning** | ABC’s of becoming a candidate, from the collection of a petition to the political defense of petitions in court. Considerations in deciding to run and declaring candidacy.
- **Messaging** | Learn how to create a political message that supporters can identify with to mobilize voters and funders.
- **Mobilization– Building a Base** | Become skilled at creating a volunteer base using community economic and political issues that affect the district where you are planning to run or manage a campaign.
- **Fundraising and Ethics/Public Speaking** | Learn the art of fundraising and identifying strategies to help a candidate raise funding for their campaign.
- **Public Speaking** | Learn how to conduct interviews, how to speak in front of a crowd, and how to respond to unexpected questions.
- **Press/Media Relations** | Have you ever spoken in front of a television camera? Dynamic opportunities to role play and learn how to talk to the press.
- **Campaign Management/Field Operations** | Steps of campaign operations from voter identification, mobilization of volunteers, direct voter contact, get out the vote, and Election Day operations.

- **Technology and Social Media Techniques in Elections** | Do you know the rules for when and how to tweet, text, or phone bank? Do you know how to maximize the reach and effectiveness of your message?
- **Election Plan** | Connect all the pieces and create a campaign election plan from beginning to end by synthesizing strategies and tactics. (LLI n.p.)

This course progression assumes a linear, chronological understanding of the skills and tools necessary to run an election campaign. The most significant assumption that this progression makes is that the participants are all aware of which campaign they are running for and have the capabilities of doing it. Yet, as I have noted earlier, running a campaign requires financial, emotional, and physical stability that many of our participants may or may not have. If the course is designed to be an entry point into understanding how effective campaigns are run in your community, LLI Florida's Advisory Board could not assume that the first step that participants needed to learn was how to raise money for a campaign. In many ways, then, New York's course progression is characterized by this crucial first step, suggesting that the most important part of a campaign is money. While in many – perhaps most – cases this is true, participants of LLI Florida's EALA consistently demonstrated an interest in running ethical campaigns, wanting to learn how to hold themselves and each other accountable in situations where someone would want to lead. Again, this is not a slight to New York's course plan; rather, it is an example of an opportunity that interdependent relationships and a “nothing about us without us” that LLI Florida was able to respond to.

Admittedly, however, the first inclination to stray from New York's schedule was because the instructors' availability did not accommodate it. The Advisory Board made the conscious decision to schedule the courses as appropriate to the instructors' availability, even leaving weeks open for possible courses that might be needed, depending on the participants' feedback. In this way, the narrative of the course became less about a story of winning an election, but rather a story that represented the instructors' own experiences with winning and losing elections. In this way, LLI Florida's narrative became a madness

narrative, where “representations...can be fragmented, conflicting, multiple, resistant, poly-vocal, multi-genred, and permissively non-rational” (Fields 43). With this in mind, members of the board began having conversations about what it would mean to make an overwhelming process appear to be incomprehensible because of the lack of linear or chronological structure. Again, Fields reminds us that

A madness narrative...would not see our irrational epistemology as deficiency. Rather, a madness narrative can make representations of the incomprehensible generative. We can write about encounters of madness through dangerous reciprocity, which takes risks, resists conclusions, embraces unpredictability, and accepts alternative ways of knowing made possible through the irrational encounters between researchers and participants. This madness sometimes resists commentary or has no path to follow or expect. (51-52)

Approaching our schedule with a madness narrative in mind, we began to see the possibilities that our schedule could offer, and shared these possibilities with instructors. The EALA in Florida would follow this schedule:

- **Mobilization– Building a Base**
- **ABCs of Becoming a Candidate**
- **Campaign Finance**
- **Press/Media Relations**
- **Campaign Management/Field Operations**
- **Public Speaking**
- **Political Messaging**
- **Election Plan**

While some of the same chronological order remained, the EALA in Florida began with conversations about recognizing building, and sustaining relationships and networks of support to begin any civic engagement endeavor. That support would characterize the candidate’s campaign. Alternatively, because madness narratives are generative, the narrative that this schedule could offer could be one of how to hold potential candidates accountable: insist on the interdependency of your community and the relationships in the

community, and offer ethical advice and support for those you want to lead. In this way, the LLI Florida Advisory Board relinquished control of the linear, argument-driven progression we had tried to enforce, and instead let the course take the route of the classes itself by letting the narratives of interdependency tell the story of civic engagement in Central Florida.

CONCLUSION

Thus madness narratives came to be central to understanding the EALA course trajectory, even extending to understanding the LLI and UFF-UCF partnership as a whole. Perhaps the most unexpected element to the LLI and UFF-UCF partnership is its very existence. While LLI has several community partnerships across New York and Florida, the fact that the faculty union of the University of Central Florida would be the primary partner is unique. It certainly shouldn't be—most of the community partnerships LLI originally made in Central Florida were unions—but the resistance for faculty to make a commitment to empowering the community is, unfortunately, not as common outside of research or service-learning partnerships. Yet, once again, Fields' madness narratives help us see what we might lose when we rely on our own rational conclusions – that is, doing the things that just *make sense* to us. In describing madness narratives, Hitt and Garrett write: “representations are fragmented and non-rational in madness narratives, and you will see...the refusal of a tidy conclusion, changes in tone and focus, and the use of whitespace and section breaks to indicate experiences that cannot easily transition or be represented (7). In order to engage citizens, we must be able to speak to citizens where they are. Too often the needs of the community are responded to in a transactional relationship, one that only provides for the community based on what we think they need, rather than what they say they need.

This is why a partnership between a faculty union and a leadership institute might seem a little off. Yet when we start to listen to the voices of the (dis)missed rhetoricians in our community and discipline, we can see just how crucial and generative a partnership like this one is. UFF-UCF's visibility as active citizens of our university and our community has increased in the local labor, community activist, and politico communities. And while some of this visibility leads to

challenges and criticism, this visibility clearly makes the intention, impact, and potential impact of our organization in the community. On a larger scale, this opportunity provides a different way for faculty to participate in the work of our union, and in doing so, gives us more attention and strength in state and local governments. Politicians are taking groups like LLI more seriously knowing that groups like UFF-UCF has the potential to communicate to thousands. Students' interest in community engagement and activism is on the rise (Higher Education Research Institute n.p.), as are campuses that offer a number of opportunities to engage in social justice activities (UCF, for example, has a Diversity and Social Inequality Minor). Unions provide a bridge for universities to reach diverse communities and have the potential to strengthen universities' partnerships with the community in constructive ways. Centralizing disability methodologies in these partnerships allows access and inclusion to become the cornerstone foundations upon which effective labor activism and social justice is built, and, by extension, the changes such activism generates. Furthermore, by combining the expertise of both groups and honoring the contributions of each, relationships are built that empower one another and opens up new possibilities to understand our community's varying needs, capabilities, and potentialities.

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