Exploring the curriculum of the Honors Living-Learning Community at Rutgers university in Newark, New Jersey, and the perceived experiences of students as change agents

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ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are positioned to meet the rising need for students to become positive change agents. Change agents does not only benefit an individual but his/her community at large. The quality of a curriculum and it's delivery to build and nurture skills are critical drivers of becoming a positive change agent. The 2016 and 2017 Honors Living-Learning Community (HLLC) at Rutgers University – Newark (RU-N), in Newark, New Jersey, was the population for this study. This is the first comprehensive study aimed to obtain the perceived experience of graduates since the origin of the program in 2015. A survey was conducted to evaluate the extent the curriculum contributes to skill enhancement to become change agents, and provide recommendations for the HLLC curriculum enhancement to prepare students to become change agents. A 5-point Likert scale ranking from not at all important to extremely important was included to determine the importance of the skills needed to be a change agent. The Cronbach alph of the survey was .87, revealing an excellent level of internal consistency among indicators of change agents outcome. The study findings revealed that the HLLC curriculum and resources prepared its students to become positive change agents. Students provided recommendations to enhance the HLLC curriculum. Other higher learning institutions may consider either creating or adopting similar curriculum structures and provide resources to equip students with the necessary skills or competencies to promote students' perceptions to become change agents.

Keywords: *Critical service-learning, Curriculum, Higher learning institutions, Pedagogy, Positive change agents, Skills.*

Highlights of this paper
- This paper highlights the role of the HLLC curriculum, and the resources provided to prepare HLLC alumni to become positive change agents.
- In addition, the perceived skills or competencies that are needed to promote change agents in order of importance.
- Other higher learning institutions may consider either creating or adopting similar curriculum structures and provide resources to equip students with the necessary skills or competencies to promote students' perceptions to become change agents.

1. INTRODUCTION

The need to become a positive change agent is not a new phenomenon. The concept of becoming a positive change agent benefits the social good of society. There is global interest in and sustantial research on how positive change agents may challenge social inequalities globally. If everyone attempts to make positive changes in their space, the world will become a better place for all. However, in order to make positive changes agents specific skills and qualities are required. Institutions of higher educationa are positioned to meet the rising need for students to become positive change agents within their communities.

Despite changes in admission practices, standardized testing continues to be a requirement for U.S. higher education preventing many potential, underrepresented students from achieving their educational goals (Nettles, 2019). Pivoting on novel comprehensive admissions evaluation approaches, the Honors Living-Learning Community (HLLC) at Rutgers University - Newark is "revolutionizing honors, cultivating talents, and engaging communities." The HLLC employs strength-based models in its admissions process, curriculum, and pedagogics in an effort to appropriately recognize students' talents, academic abilities, and intellectual abilities.

HLLC students are exposed to a diverse and inclusive curriculum taught by diverse faculty and community leaders to equip them to become positive change agents. The curriculum focuses on enhancing the student knowledge of and experiences with social justice issues while navigating different spaces. Through partnerships with public and private stakeholders, HLLC scholars engage with projects and take courses design to serve the public good. This paper explores how students perceive the HLLC curriculum with an acute focus on its relevance to the social justice mission of HLLC – nurturing scholars on their journey toward becoming positive change agents (Rutgers University-Newark, 2022).

2. BACKGROUND

A signature initiative growing out of Chancelor Nancy Cantor's strategic plan, the Honors Living-Learning Community was piloted in the fall semester of 2015 with 30 scholars as part of the first cohort. It is useful to note that this initial cohort was different in several respects from subsequent cohorts. HLLC Scholars students in the 2015 cohort lived together in the residence hall but did not navigate the current 2 phase admission process. Since then, the HLLC has admitted 80 new students every year and has served over 500 students. The HLLC is unique because it functions as both an academic honors program and a residential living-learning community with an overarching theme of "Local Citizenship in a Global World." This concept is vested in the aforementioned 2014 strategic plan of Rutgers that aims for a cross-cutting initiative – that embraces this concept and engaging interdisciplinary leaders and units at RU-N. Through this initiative, talented scholars from Newark, the Greater Newark area, New Jersey, and across the United States live and learn together in a conducive educational and publicly engaged environment (Rutgers University-Newark, 2022).

The HLLC is a transformative college model that fosters the academic, social, and personal development of gifted scholars from a variety of communities who wish to be change agents in their communities and beyond. HLLC

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originates from the roots of racists, classists, and deficit principles that produce and sustain obstacles to scholar and marginalized community, to access higher education (Batista, Collado, Perez, & II, 2018). HLLC accepts a diverse group of students ranging from high school graduates to community college transfer students who are of different ages, background, socio-economic status, and lived experiences (Rutgers University-Newark, 2022).

The HLLC admissions process is robust with an established rubric used to holistically assess a student's ability to thrive in college and positively contribute to soceity. Furthermore, the admission process involves both large groups and individual interviews. HLLC scholars are selected to join a living-learning community and intergenerational network across all intersections of identity. Identity intersections focus on cultivating knowledge; fostering understanding across and within groups; and activating social, institutional, and cultural changes. With a curriculum representing local to global citizenship, the HLLC brings together scholars, and faculty members from all schools at RU-N as well as community-based partners. Emphasizing social action and addressing issues of inequality, HLLC brings together the academic sphere with community-based organizations to design and implement projects and courses that contribute to the benefit of society and enact changes based on shared passions and interests.

The HLLC curriculum consists of three required core courses: (1) *Local Citizenship in a Global World*; (2) *Navigating Spaces, Places, and Identities*; and (3) *Voice, Citizenship, and Community Engagement. Local Citizenship in a Global World* and *Navigating Spaces, Places, and Identities* ar both offered in the first semester and *Voice, Citizenship, and Community Engagement* is offered in the second semester. In addition, all students are required to complete a capstone project and take three additional elective courses. The elective courses are interdisciplinarity and are offered via various academic departments. In addition, the HLLC also hosts various identity-based, student-led community groups. These groups include Man of Character, Woman of Color, and Shades of Love to name a few (Rutgers University-Newark, 2022).

2.1. Objectives

The overall objective of this study is to examine the extent to which the HLLC curriculum impacts HLLC alumni to become positive change agents. This study was designed to answer the following research questions as part of the overall objective of the study.

1. To what extent did the HLLC curriculum enhance student skills to become positive change agents?
2. Based on study findings, what modifications to the HLLC curriculum are recommended?

2.2. Conceptual Framework

To evaluate the HLLC curriculum, the *Iris M. Yob Conceptual Framework for a Curriculum in Social Change* was used as the curriculum model because it focuses on a variety of competencies needed for building a curriculum that fosters social change (Yob, 2018). The model encompasses curriculum building through lived experiences and thought processing when addressing social issues (knowledge); abilities needed to act (skills); and values, belief, and attitudes (affective) as the three core domains. The knowledge domain included competencies of scholarship, systematic thinking, and reflection, while application, advocacy, collaboration, and political engagement are included in the skills domain. Ethics, commitment, and courage comprise the affective domain. The framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1 illustrates how each of these domains have an impact on the role of the curriculum in becoming a change agent. The knowledge domain relates to what students should know and how they should think and is comprised of interpretation, meaning-making, critical thinking, judgement, and creative imagination. Higher education institutions are the most appropriate arena for developiving these elements (Yob, 2018), making them vital to benefit society. The

scholarship competency is widely defined as both what a learner learns from other scholars as well as their contribution to new findings.
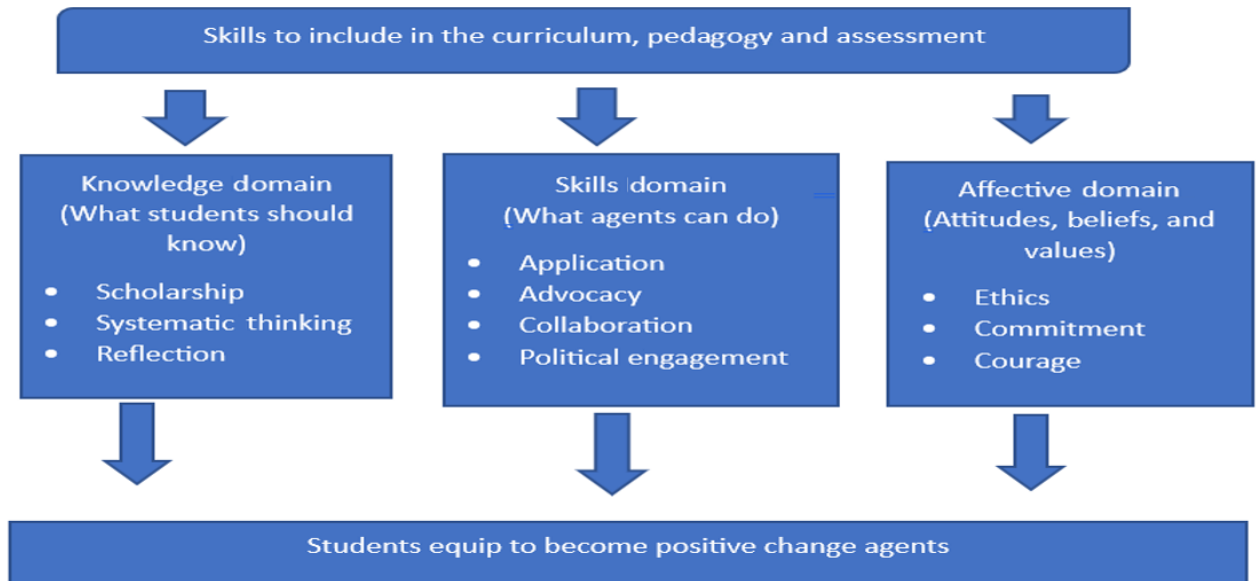
Source: Yob (2018).

Students critically examine pertinent theories and current research so that they may approach a challenge or opportunity with confidence. This creates room for new discoveries, and new views, and insights that may lead to new actions or areas of investigation using proper research techniques and instruments (Balakas & Sparks, 2010; O'Brien, 2009). According to Breunig (2010), theory and research are the precursors to drive social change action and without them, social change activity can be aimless, merely reflexive, and random. Most societal issues are multidimensional because they have various causes, manifestations, and impacts, necessitating various solutions. For example, inequitable power distribution is often determined by wealth, gender, and ethnicity. If these issues are not addressed holistically, no progress toward a long-term solution may be made. Viewing the problem through a larger lens may aid social change agents in addressing power with multiple approaches or at the very least, prioritizing efforts while mitigating the effects of what cannot be addressed.

In contrast, reflection refers to the process of considering things before taking effective action. It happens at every stage of social change work, from recognizing the scope and urgency of a problem to developing and implementing a solution. If students are not convinced that an issue is worthy of their time and attention or that a practical solution cannot be found, reflection may not occur at the start of the process. Students must be aware of the reasons for their actions along with the process for them to have meaning. It is easy for social change agents to focus their efforts on doing rather than on reflection of the results of improvements.

The skills domain focuses on the abilities of change agents. Certain personality types may gravitate toward specific abilities than others, and certain situations will require specific skills. The skills domain consists of the application, advocacy, collaboration, and political engagement competencies. The application skill is the first competency within the skills domain. Dewey (1963) states that practical experience combined with reflection was not limited to only learning but also to a democracy in which learners have a sense of social duty. Also, theory and personal experience combine to create a sense of empowerment that can lead to change (Freire, 1970, 1976). Experiential learning has proven to be particularly effective in preparation for social transformation. For example,

studies have found that service-learning which includes classroom experience plus working on global issues in the community, increased a student engagement with the community outside of the university. Service-learning increases understanding of community issues and problems; creates a deeper appreciation of and ability to relate to cultural and racial differences; fosters a stronger belief in the ability to make a difference, and a more profound commitment to community service (Gallini & Moely, 2003).

The advocacy competency is fundamentally an educational endeavor to raise awareness and elicit a sympathetic reaction to a problem (Yob, 2018), advocacy is defined as "having a voice for the downtrodden and disadvantaged" in its most basic form (Chang, Hays, & Milliken, 2009). Shier and Handy (2015) developed a typology of advocacy approaches based on a study of nonprofit social interventions that included two main goals: (1) Raising public awareness through education initiatives, community engagement, and changing public perceptions; and (2) Influencing policy direction through bringing information to policymakers, conducting research, and discussions in networks of local and state service providers. Chang et al. (2009) propose five actions for professional counsellors to follow in their advocacy position based on this definition: giving vital information, functioning as a mediator, bargaining for better services, lobbying, and advising funding agencies. These concepts are applicable to different advocacy scenarios in which the advocate's responsibility is to speak on someone else's behalf. Also, inclusive of this concept is the role of social media. Social media has become an essential instrument for activism (Guo & Saxton, 2014).

The collaboration competency deals with the complex nature of a change. Collaboration with others is required to meet this complexity and multiply the efforts of a single individual. It is impossible to change the system on one's own. There are numerous layers of collaboration and many interested parties involved in a social change initiative. Second, the collaboration competency includes the people with whom we work. These individuals become prominent members of the team. Systemic thinking can show our complicity in others' needs—our advantages, backgrounds, and opportunities may have come at the expense of others. Working with others can educate students about their privilege in a society where not everyone has the same opportunities. As this understanding expands, the social change agent changes as well. Furthermore, persons in a team or group have critical views on how an activity addresses genuine needs. Civic skills, including the ability to receive and interpret information; speaking and listening collaboratively; dialoguing successfully about differences; resolving problems; and reaching agreements are among the talents needed for effective collaboration. These skills, including political engagement (Levine, 2010) can be learned and enhanced via practice and reflection. Levine (2010) states, "In today's world, knowledge is extensively disseminated, and public officials profit from having access to that scattered knowledge" (p. 5). While faculty and students may agree that such an education is beneficial, some are apprehensive about becoming politically involved in a classroom environment (Yob & Ferraro, 2013). Political engagement can be broken down into specific learnable skills, such as communicating research findings and proposing action models; locating political leaders who may be involved in the relevant legislation; identifying and using appropriate channels for communicating with legislators; becoming involved in election campaigns; running for local, state, or national office; and so on. Serving on a policy committee allows one to put political abilities to work by making a case, convincing others, forging coalitions, and proposing cost-effective, practical solutions. Committees like these can be found in the workplace, in professional organizations, and in politics.

Attitudes, beliefs, and ethics fall under the affective domain category. Faith, optimism, a sense of calling, outrage at injustice, and shame over one's privileged standing in society all play a role in the emotional world of social change agents (Freire & Freire, 1997). Ethics as the first competency under the affective domain have a role in every interaction between humans (Yob, 2018). Ethics explains proper behavior toward others and contributes to a person's moral outlook on life. Ethics play a crucial part in social change, both in pointing out unethical behavior to be

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addressed and in guiding interactions between the change agent and his/her team members and others he/she works with and for. A "dialogic and deliberative procedure" (Román, 2010) may be required to identify and agree on the specific ethics involved in a social change effort.

The second competency under the affective domain is commitment. The rational persuasiveness of theory, research, and aspirations sustains engagement in a long-term social change project, especially when outcomes fall fall short of expectations. The last competency of affective domain is courage, Campos (2012) defines courage as " the physical, mental, or moral fortitude to take risks that may have unfavorable or negative repercussions in order to take a reasonable and appropriate path of conduct " (p. 212). However, no one suggests that change agents be put in dangerous or life-threatening situations. Change agents take the risk of being demonized, losing friends and long-standing relationships, or having a more challenging time finding work. However, as Freire (1998) points out, engaging in social change puts our valued ideas and assumptions and our sense of self in jeopardy as we interact with others.

These domains with their competencies are important, unique, and valuable to assisting students to become positive change agents. As noted, higher education institutions can play a vital role in how curriculums are designed and implemented.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

What is required to become a change agent can vary based on lived experiences and perceptions. The rapid changing global scenery demands citizens be prepared to serve as change agents. Boyer (1994) proposes that higher education should rethink its aim to educate students for life as responsible citizens rather than only for a job. Consequently, institutions of higher education can capitalize on this by combining theory and practice to address challenging societal issues. All citizens should be involved; however, educational institutions must equip their students with the necessary skills to become change agents to improve their communities and the world.

Stephens, Hernandez, Román, Graham, and Scholz (2008) argue that society is being confronted with unprecedented challenges due to our interactions with natural systems on the planet. Furthermore, current resource-use trends and patterns, along with a quickly changing, increasingly uneven, complex, and linked societal structure and rapid technological progress, are having a crucial and unsustainable impact on human-environment interactions. This era known as the Anthropocene is a new epoch that originated in the early 1800s with the onset of industrialization and is characterized as a period of intense, irreversible human influence on the Earth's systems (Stephens et al., 2008). The magnitude and intensity of human influence on the Earth's systems have jeopardized the long-term provision of basic human needs such as water, food, and shelter during the Anthropocene. As the rate of change in many dimensions accelerates, the sustainability concerns that human society is confronted with are becoming increasingly pressing. Given the pressing need to address various areas of sustainability, new opportunities for social stakeholders and institutions to act innovatively are emerging. Higher education institutions have a particularly intriguing potential for facilitating societal responses to the multiplicity of sustainability concerns that communities worldwide are confronting. Tajik (2008) supports the work of Stephens et al. (2008) that contemporary societies' rapidly changing socio-political and economic conditions necessitate radical changes in formal education and educational practices worldwide. With these changes a new generation of chance agents with specific roles and skill sets are needed to affect change. The next section addresses what the roles of these change agents are.

3.1. Role of Change Agents

The roles of the change agent are extensive. Consultation, training, and research are often categorized as the primary roles (Stephen, 2010; Tidd & Bessant, 2020). As a consultant, change agents utilize data to gather information and assist members of a group or community to determine solutions to identified challenges (Lunenburg, 2010). In addition, Lunenburg (2010) states that the change agents may also serve as a trainer. As a trainer, the change agent assists group or community members in deriving actionable implications from current data, and providing them with new skill sets to retrieve, translate, and employ new data to solve future problems. According to Lunenburg (2010) another role of the change agent is that of a researcher and trainer. The change agent may train a group of community members in the skills needed to assess the efficacy of action plans and how to execute those action steps. Lastly, the change agent creates an evaluation plan to solve current and future problems (Lunenburg, 2010).

The role of a change agent has allowed students to have a participatory role in the process of social change. Kay, Dunne, and Hutchinson (2010) identify four areas through which students can interact and engage with their learning. These areas include being evaluators, participants, partners, and change agents. These roles intersect and highlights how there are distinctions in how students participate within higher education institutions to enhance their experiences and the level to which they can be proactive in bringing about change. In exploring these roles, we will start with students as evaluators. Evaluation refers to the methods by which the institution, or external bodies, drive change. It may include data collected by listening to and obtaining feedback from students through surveys, focus groups, and other methods for gathering informal evaluative feedback.

The second role focuses on students as participants. This allows for a more student-led strategy that does not imply active engagement with change. This entails demonstrating a commitment to change through student-staff interactions and providing solutions through secondary school learning certificates (SSLC) and other kinds of representation. It also includes student participation in committee structures across the entire institutional system. Finally, students as partners, co-creators, and experts emphasize active student engagement and collaboration. For example, students may train staff on new skills, such as innovative technologies; designing curricula and resources; negotiating examination questions or writing question banks; setting assignments; and redesigning module provision and delivery.

To conclude, students as change agents create a space where they can be actively involved in change processes as leaders through being highly involved with their institutions and their subject areas and being influential in determining the focus and direction of the institution.

3.2. The Curriculum as a Vehicle to Promote Change Agents

What can institutions of higher education do to address the need for change agents? One strategy is to design and execute a curriculum that can prepare students to become change agents. The word curriculum comes from the Latin word "curriculum," which means "racecourse." It came to signify "course of study" or "syllabus." The curriculum is the overall strategy for choosing subject matter and setting up educational opportunities with the aim of modifying and improving learners' attitudes and actions (Armstrong, 1989). This study will base the definition of curriculum from the work of Bilbao, Luncido, Lringan, and Javier (2008) who defined the term as all learning experiences throughout society, not just those that take place in schools.

The concept is significantly broader, encompassing all of an educational institution's planned learning experiences. The curriculum must be in a format that can be shared with individuals involved with the educational institution, be available for criticism, and easily translated into practice. A curriculum has three layers: what is expected of students, what is presented to students, and what students experience. The creation of a curriculum is the

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outcome of human initiative. The principles and assumptions that guide the development of a curriculum relate to what students should know and how learning should occur. Critical curriculum components are content, teaching and learning methodologies, assessment systems, and evaluation processes (Prideaux, 2003).

What should the curriculum resemble to guarantee that students get the skills they need to be change agents? Which of the two pedagogies, traditional service-learning or critical service-learning, can produce the best results in preparing students to be change agents? Traditional service learning emphasizes hands-on learning and the values of social responsibility, and the benefit of society (Mitchell, 2008) Critical service-learning aims to examine and alter the institutions and systems that perpetuate unequal distribution of power and privilege and serve community needs (Mitchell, 2008). Furthermore Mitchell (2008) states critical service-learning employs complex reflection processes to encourage students to question the present quo and consider what would be required (politically, economically, and culturally) to achieve more social equality. Students gain a new perspective on the world around them and ponder essential issues such as diversity, privilege, and power.

3.3. The Pedagogy

While traditional service-learning and critical service-learning aim for individual transformation and student growth, critical service-learning pedagogy balances student outcomes with a focus on social change. Consequently, it necessitates rethinking the types of service activities in which students participate, as well as organizing projects and assignments that require students to investigate and comprehend the root causes of social problems, as well as the courses of action required to challenge and change the structures that perpetuate those problems (Mitchell, 2008).

A rising body of research in higher education suggests that community service combined with classroom learning is fundamentally tied to social justice issues (Delve, Mintz, & Stewart, 1990; Jacoby, 1996; Rosenberger, 2000; Wade, 2001; Wade, 2014). Simultaneously, a growing amount of research suggests that the traditional service-learning strategy is insufficient (Brown, 2001; Butin, 2005; Cipolle, 2004; Walker, 2000). This research supports a "critical" approach to community service learning with a clear goal of social justice. For example, what is the difference between traditional and critical service training? "Critical service-learning serves as a vehicle for connecting students and institutions to their communities and the wider social good while instilling in students the principles of community and social responsibility," according to experts in this field (Neururer & Rhoads, 1998).

In a critical service-learning opportunity, students may be requested to reflect on their service in the context of broader societal issues using what is happening in the classroom—readings, discussions, writing assignments, and other activities. This perspective is congruent with liberatory pedagogy, in which one of the purposes of education is for students to become informed about the social, political, and economic elements that have shaped their and others' lives (Rhoads, 1998). In addition, critical service-learning can help students develop the skills they need to be change agents.

4. METHODOLOGY

A mixed methods study design is utilized for this study. Quantitative survey data was examined and triangulated with qualitative themes to improve interpretation. A survey consisting of 16 questions was administered through an online survey, Qualtrics, and had an estimated completion time of 15 to 25 minutes. Prior to administering the actual survey, a pilot test was conducted on 30 graduates from the HLLC 2015 entry cohort. The pilot test survey was active for three weeks. A reminder email was sent after the second week, to maximize response rate. From the 30 students in the 2015 cohort, only five students responded. The survey, with minor adjustments, was replicated for HLLC graduates of the 2016 and 2017 cohorts.

There was a total of 107 HLLC graduates who were enrolled in 2016 and 2017 at Rutgers University - Newark. These graduates received an email link to the Qualtrics survey. During the three months of data collection, the graduates received two reminders email to complete the survey. Seventy nine graduates responded to the survey, but 69 agreed to participate in the survey and eight disagreed after the completion of an electronic consent to participate in the study. Of this number, 19 had incomplete responses and were not included in the total sample of 50 respondents.

The survey questions consisted of a Likert scale, multiple choice, and open-ended questions. The quantitative data captured respondents' demographics, educational level, employment status, and the reason for applying to the HLLC. Another section of the survey provided a list of skills and asked respondents to rate their perception about the level of importance in being change agent. All items using a 5-point Likert scale type rated from not at all important (1) to extremely important (5). In addition, a text option was provided for respondents to list any additional skills. To complete the survey, 4 open-ended questions were posed to identify community engagement activities that the students were involved in, the role of the HLLC curriculum in assisting the respondents to master the skills needed to be a change agent, their perception on being a change agent since post-graduation, and recommendations to enhance the HLLC curriculum. The survey data was analyzed using descriptive statistics. All data was summarized as frequency and percentage. Resultant themes were triangulated with aggregate survey responses that further supported thematic evidence. Survey results were analyzed using mixed methods utilizing the statistical software suite, SPSS V28.0 designed by IBM and NVivo V12.0 software programs.

5. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive characteristics of the categorical variables in the sample. These variables included age, gender, racial identification, employment status, educational level, admissions year, and graduation year. Most respondents identified as Black/African American (56%) and followed by Latinx (24%). Females accounted for the largest propotion of the sample (58%); followed by males (40%), and binary/gender nonconforming (2%). Fifty-eight percent (58%) of the sample was between the ages 20 to 24 years old, while 18% was between 25 and 30 years old. Eighty-four percent (84%) attained a bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS) and 10% attained a master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd). Seventy-four percent (74%) and 26% of the sample was admitted to HLLC in 2017 and 2016, respectively. Twenty-eight percent (28%) graduated in 2021, 36% in 2020, 26% in 2019, 8% in 2018, and 2% in 2017. The majority of respondents (70%) were employed full-time.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by gender, age, racial identification, educational level, work status, admission year, graduation year (*n*=50).

Distribution of respondents by gender, age, racial identification, educational level, work status, admission year, graduation year (*n*=50)

Category	*n*	Percent (%)
Gender		
Male	20	40.0
Female	29	58.0
Non-binary	0	0.0
Self-describe	1	2.0
Total	50	100.0
Age		
20 - 25 years old	29	58.0
26 - 30 years old	9	18.0
31 - 35 years old	2	4.0
36- 40 years old	6	12.0
41 - 45 years old	2	4.0
46 + years old	2	4.0
Total	50	100.0

Distribution of respondents by gender, age, racial identification, educational level, work status, admission year, graduation year (*n*=50)

Category	*n*	Percent (%)
Racial identification		
Asian/Pacific Islander/South Asian	3	6.0
Male	2	66.7
Female	1	33.3
Black/African American	28	56.0
Male	17	60.7
Female	10	35.7
Self-describe	1	3.6
Black/African American, Latinx/Hispanic	2	4.0
Male	0	0.0
Female	2	100.0
Black/African American, Latinx/Hispanic, White/Caucasian, American Indian/Alaska Native/First Nations/Indigenous	1	2.0
Male	0	0.0
Female	1	100.0
Black/African American, White/Caucasian, Self-describe	1	2.0
Male	1	100.0
Female	0	0.0
Latinx/Hispanic	12	24.0
Male	3	25.0
Female	9	75.0
Latinx/Hispanic, White/Caucasian	1	2.0
Male	0	0.0
Female	1	100.0
White/Caucasian	2	4.0
Male	2	100.0
Female	0	0.0
Total	50	100.0
Educational level		
Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)	42	84.0
Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, Med)	5	10.0
Professional degree (e.g., JD, MBA)	1	2.0
Other (Please specify)	2	4.0
Total	50	100.0
Work status		
Employed full time	35	70.0
Employed part time	6	12.0
Self employed	4	8.0
Unemployed	5	10.0
Total	50	100.0
Admissions year		
2017	37	73.9
2016	13	26.1
Total	50	100.0
Graduation year		
2021	14	28.0
2020	18	36.0
2019	13	26.0
2018	4	8.0
2017	1	2.0
2016	0	0.0
Total	50	100.0

Respondents were referred to the HLLC from a single source or a combination of sources. The top three referral sources were Rutgers website (18 respondents), Community College (13 respondents), friends or family (10

respondents), Rutgers staff (7 respondents), and Rutgers Open House (4 respondents). Three participants were referred to the HLLC by both their high schools, and through Newark community-based organizations. Other referral sources included Mountain View Community, Rutgers application form, an email solicitation, Rutgers recruitment staff. Social justice mission (31 responses), financial benefits-residential scholarship (30 responses), curriculum (12 responses) and the HLLC reputation (9) were among the top choices selected as to why participants applied to the HLLC. Additional reasons included Guidance Counsellors advice (four responses) and advice received from other sources (e.g., alumni of HLLC, New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons Consortium (NJ STEP, etc.) (7 respondents).

Using a 5-point Likert scale, from not at all important (1) to extremely important (5), respondnets were asked to rank the skills needed to be included into building a curriculum to become a change agent based on Yob (2018) model. Results are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Curriculum skills to become change agent.

How important are each of the skills needed to be a change agent? (n = 42)	Mean ± SD
Scholarship (What you have learned through research, interaction with fellow scholars, and theories to help you to make informed decisions.)	4.52 ± 0.80
Systematic thinking (Looking at problems holistically)	4.57 ± 0.63
Ethics (Fearlessly bringing attention to unethical behavior and addressing it)	4.64 ± 0.62
Application skills (Applying theoretical knowledge to real life problems)	4.40 ± 0.83
Advocacy (raising awareness of an issue and responding compassionately to it)	4.62 ± 0.54
Collaboration (Addressing issues as part of a team)	4.57 ± 0.63
Political engagement (Finding and utilizing appropriate networks for communicating with legislators)	4.17 ± 0.88
Reflection (Looking at reasons behind actions)	4.67 ± 0.61
Commitment (Not to giving up if disappointments cross your road)	4.62 ± 0.76
Courage (Strength to risk negative consequences when one opts for a responsible action or decision)	4.31 ± 1.07
Grand mean	4.51
Cronbach's alpha	0.87

Based on the 5-point Likert scale, the grand mean of the perceived importance fo the curriculum skills needed to be a change agent was 4.51. The Cronbach's alpha coefficients for indicators across the skills was 0.87, revealing an excellent level of internal consistency of survey indicators.

Three themes emerged from open-ended questions on community engagement activities to include: community engagements (47.6%), mentoring (28.6%), charity projects (7.1%), and lack of engagement in change agent activities because of either due to the COVID-19 pandemic or other life circumstances (16.7%).

A majority of respondents (71.4%) reported that HLLC guided them to apply theoretical knowledge to their lives, while 16.7% reported that they now have a better understanding of the skills that are required. In addition, 11.9% indicated that they learned how to network, and 54.3% reported that their skills had not evolved post-graduation. However, 45.7% of the respondents reported that the HLLC curriculum significantly assisted them in evolving the skills needed to become a change agent, and 20% of the participants reported that the HLLC curriculum moderately impacted their skills. Additional skills to become a change agent most cited by respondents included effective listening skills, transparency/accountability, networking, mentoring, leadership, compassion/empathy, and responsibility. Other skills cited were communications, public speaking, time management, negotiation, contract disputes; being proactive, compassion, and perseverance/determination. The role of the HLLC curriculum in helping students master the skills needed to become a change agent included creating an inclusive learning environment that allows students to learn from diverse groups of leaders; mentors; increased awareness of how an individual actions can have an impact

on society, thinking beyond oneself, being culturally competent and sensitive to the needs of others; understanding the history of a place and it's people; fostering empowerment to discuss, research, and rationalize to address societal issues; and increased collaboration and engagement with diverse groups.

6. DISCUSSION

This study was designed to determine to what extent alumni perceived the importance of their HLLC curriculum in becoming a change agent. Stephens et al. (2008) state that societies are confronted with many challenges, and higher education institutions should reconsider their role in preparing students for future employment and preparing students to become responsible citizens (Boyer, 1994). The first research question in this study sought to determine to what extent the HLLC curriculum contributes to skill enhancement to facilitate students in becoming change agents? With a 5-point Likert scale rating from not at all important to extremely important, respondents found that the knowledge, skills, and affective domains were essential to building a curriculum to becoming a positive change agent. The respondents rated the skills needed to become a positive change agent in order of importance with the same 5-point Likert scale. Respondents scored reflection skills as the most important, followed by ethics, advocacy and commitment, systematic thinking, collaboration, scholarship, and application skills. Respondents rated the lowest skills of perceived importance as courage and political engagement. According to Yob (2018), students need these skills to become positive change agents. Yob (2018), however, does not link a level of importance to each of these skills. The respondents linked these skills according to the level of importance to become positive change agents may be attributed to their personal experience with change agent activities. Furthermore, we can accept that the change in activities involved may require different skill sets.

Other reported perceiced change agent skills included listening skills, transparency/accountability, networking, mentoring, leadership, compassion/empathy, innovation, and responsibility, in addition to communications, public speaking, time management, negotiation, contract disputes, being proactive to make a change. According to the literature studied, Yob (2018) states three domains of skills, but other skills may be needed to become a positive change agent. All these skills are needed to effectively accomplish the role of consultant, trainers and researchers to accomplish positive change agent activities effectively and efficiently (Stephen, 2010; Tidd & Bessant, 2020).

Overall, the respondents reported that the HLLC curriculum helped them master the skills needed to become change agents. HLLC offered an inclusive learning environment that allowed students to learn from diverse groups of leaders and mentors. In addition, the HLL curriculum increased student awareness of how their actions may impact society; thinking beyond oneself; being culturally competent and sensitive to the needs of others; understanding the history of a place and it is people; fostering empowerment to discuss, and address societal issues; increasing collaboration and engagement with diverse groups. According to Breunig (2010) research and theory precursors to social change and without them, efforts for social change may be aimless, merely reflexive, and random.

In alignment with Bilbao et al. (2008), curriculum design and execution play a pivotal role in ensuring students grasp the skills needed to become positive change agents. It is crucial to remember that social transformation is a multifaceted endeavor that requires knowledge, skills, and beliefs. Genuine change can occur in all those involved when individuals thoughts, abilities, and feelings become active in advancing the common good. Students' equipped for this type of work is a step toward constructive social change in and of itself. Jacoby (1996) state that critical service learning offers the opportunity to serve community needs. Secondly, Rhoads (1998) argues that critical service-learning can help students develop their skills to be change agents. Furthermore, research maintains that community service learning combined with classroom learning can play a significant role in social justice issues (Delve et al., 1990; Jacoby, 1996; Rosenberger, 2000; Wade, 2001; Wade, 2014). According to the data collected for this

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study, one can conclude that change agents should have various skill sets that may contribute to successful positive change agent activities. However certain skills may be more pertinent depending on the change agent activity.

7. LIMITATIONS

A limitation to this study is the small sample size of HLLC alumni only. Therefore, findings from this study are not generalizable to the entire HLLC student body. Also, respondents may have had their own biases in their responses. In addition, the study did not incorporate feedback from faculty and community leaders about their perceptions of the HLLC curriculum.

7.1. Research Significance

Gaps identified in this study will pave the way to include the recommendations to augment the curriculum and pedagogy to nurture HLLC scholars to become effective and efficient positive change agents. Lessons learned from this study may be adopted by other higher education institutions around the country to either adopt, enhance, or tailor their curricula to ensure that students are equipped with the necessary skills or competencies to become change agents. Becoming a positive change agent does not only benefit the student or HLLC scholar, but their communities on a local, national, and international level.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings of this study have several important implications for future practice. Participants provided recommendations to enhance the HLLC curriculum. These recommendations include the following: (1) faculty should be more organized and prepared; (2) expansion of the curriculum beyond the city of Newark to give students an understanding of national and global issues; (3) engagement in public speaking courses, debating opportunities, computer literacy, and supplement courses (e.g., business, law, etc.); (4) diversification of mentors and field trips through which students can build a network for future reference.; (5) addition of case studies to research, statistics, events, and real-life problem solving; (6) provision of feedback from students on course offering; (7) exploration of relationships with profitable organizations in addition to governmental and non-profit; (8) increase the number of students accepted into the program; (9) create a stronger alumni relation; and (10) replicate the HLLC curriculum in other institutions of higher learning.

8.1. Areas For Future Research

Further studies are needed to evaluate the impact of the HLLC curriculum on students becoming change agents and the relationships between staff and students. Participants in this study recommended the addition of survey questions on the HLLC residential experience. There is also a need for longer term studies to evaluate the impact of the curriculum on the long-term goals of the graduates and their employment. More efforts are also needed to ensure that course evaluations are conducted throughout the duration of the HLLC program.

9. CONCLUSION

This is the first comprehensive study exploring the role of the HLLC curriculum in guiding students to become positive change agents. Although, all skills were critical, students ranked refelection skills as the most important and the lowest skills of perceived importance as courage and political engagement needed to build a curriculum. In addition, students reported additional skills that were not part of Yob (2018) framework. Finally, students provided recommendations on how to enhance the HLLC curriculum. Results from this study may shape honors living-learning

communities hosted by other institutions of higher education. In conclusion, these findings add to existing literature on honors living-learning programs.

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