

University of Central Florida

STARS

High Impact Practices Student Showcase
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Leadership Through The Special Olympics Florida

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Abstract

Over the past few months, we have gotten the opportunity to work with the Special Olympics Florida, an organization centered around connecting individuals with intellectual disabilities, with the community. We chose to volunteer with this organization because of the amazing mission they hold themselves accountable to, and for their constant involvement in the individuals of Central Florida. After volunteering at a variety of sports events such as basketball, cornhole, horseback riding, and baseball, we were able to see, first hand, how congruent the Special Olympics actually is.

Course Connection

Through volunteering with the Special Olympics Florida, we saw all the 7C's of the Social Change model being expressed, however, we specifically wanted to highlight Common Purpose and Collaboration.

Common Purpose is something all the volunteers and staff share, because everybody involved with this organization, wants to provide encouragement and positivity for the athletes. Collaboration is also seen through this organization because all the events are planned and executed using teams, whether it's working with other, similar organizations, or with the athletes directly.

We also recognized different types of leadership while working with this organization, such as Relational Leadership and Authentic Leadership. Relational leadership, which is centered around building relationships is seen clearly through the way the staff and volunteers work with the athletes and help them to achieve their goals on and off the field! Authentic Leadership, which is the connection between what you do, think, feel, and say, is seen through the way the written mission of the Special Olympics, coincides with the actual work that they do.

We were only able to recognize and apply these aspects of the organization because of the material we learned in this course.

Community Impact

To express all the ways the Special Olympics has impacted the community would be impossible. This organization impacts not only the athletes, by providing them with a positive environment to receive encouragement, positivity, determination, fellowship, and the freedom to play the sports they love, surrounded by others similar to them in many ways. Not only that, but all staff members and volunteers who contribute to this organization are impacted, as they share their love for people with their love for sports. Staff members gifted with communication and patience love interacting with these athletes, and there is always a valued role for everybody involved.

The athletes with intellectual disabilities, as we have discovered by talking and interacting with them during events, take what they learn and the friends they've made in the Special Olympics, into every aspect of their lives. In all, while the world tells these individuals that their disability holds them back, the Special Olympics ensures these athletes know how strong and capable they really are. That is what made us want to explore more about this organization, and we are proud to say that this is exactly what we found in the real work that they do.

Reflection

In conclusion to what we've seen and analyzed about the Special Olympics this semester, we can reflect upon the fact that Special Olympics does in fact ensure they are a congruent organization, who put the wellbeing of their athletes above all else. For example, through the basketball event, we got to play with those who have intellectual disabilities and encourage fair and fun team play!

Additionally, after connecting what we've learned in the classroom, and applying it to the Special Olympics, we leave this project more knowledgeable and empathetic towards the valued members of our community. We also recognize the importance of sports, as said by Eunis Kennedy Shriver when she started the organization, "sports could be a common ground to unite all people from all walks of life", and we couldn't agree more!

Lastly, most all of our knowledge going into this service learning project, came from the material learned in class through the class textbook, outlining the 7C's, and types of leadership in great depth. (see in references)

Civic Responsibility

Our active participation in the public life of our community has kept us more involved, engaged, and encouraged to continue our focus on the common good. According to Mesa Community College, Civic Responsibility is "active participation in the public life of a community in an informed, committed, and constructive manner, with a focus on the common good" (Larson-Keagy, E. (n.d.).

References

(Course Textbook)
Komives, S. R., & Wagner, W. (2017). *Leadership for a Better World: Understanding the social change model of leadership development* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

(Special Olympics)
Region area county map. Special Olympics Florida. (n.d.). <https://www.specialolympicsflorida.org/map>

(Mesa University Definition Citation)
Larson-Keagy, E. (n.d.). *Mesa Community College*. Civic Responsibility and Service Learning: The Need for Curricular Integration | Community & Civic Engagement. <https://www.mesacc.edu/community-civic-engagement/journals/civic-responsibility-and-service-learning-need-curricular#:~:text=Civic%20responsibility%20means%20active%20participation,that%20works%20for%20your%20class>.

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