A New GENERATION of SERVANT
LEADERS

SUMMER PROGRAM FOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS FOCUSES ON LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT, FAITH FORMATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

By Gina O’Malley

Eager hands guide markers across poster boards, taking care to write welcome messages correctly in nearly a dozen languages.

The artists behind the colorful posters? Fourteen students from six Pittsburgh and Philadelphia Catholic high schools. They haven’t been on campus for very long, but with open hearts and creative minds, they’re already inspired by what they’ve learned at the inaugural Duquesne University Leadership Academy (DULA).

The welcome posters will greet immigrant children in their native languages as they arrive to campus for the Alliance for Refugee Youth Support and Education’s (ARYSE) summer programming just a few weeks later.

“When they come here, they feel the comfort of their own identity and narrative. It’s cool to me to see new languages that I have not learned and see new cultural perspectives,” said Blake Neiderlander, 17, a student at Central Catholic High School.

New Program, Deep Roots

From June 11 to 15, DULA students lived on campus and participated in workshops and community engagement activities to awaken and refine their leadership skills.

When Duquesne’s new strategic plan was created two years ago, a centerpiece was creating a high school leadership program reminiscent of and inspired by Duquesne’s earliest days as a University and preparatory school (“Duquesne Prep”).

Educating youth, creating partnerships and serving the community have been longstanding priorities and were central to Duquesne’s founding.

“This fits with who we are, and who we have been. Many people don’t realize there was a prep school component to the University for many years. It’s exciting to bring back one of our past traditions and reimagine it for today’s high school students,” said Adam Wasilko, director of freshman development and
ABOVE LEFT: Terri Baltimore leads an interactive tour of Pittsburgh’s Hill District neighborhood.
ABOVE RIGHT: Blake Neiderlander creates a welcome poster for ARYSE summer program participants.
BOTTOM RIGHT: DULA participants learn about the life and legacy of American playwright August Wilson during a stop at his birthplace.
DULA participants share a laugh as they walk to their next activity.
disability services, who helped plan DULA.

DULA helps the University serve local communities through a new channel, teaches students to think in innovative ways and encourages responsible servant leadership grounded in faith—skills that will remain with participants throughout their lives.

“A servant leader is primarily concerned with the well-being and growth of the community. It’s different than traditional leadership where the primary focus is unilateral, top-down power,” said Luci-Jo DiMaggio, director of mission animation and one of DULA’s planners.

The program draws from the best academic resources at the University while immersing students in serious community engagement activity and faith formation opportunities.

“DULA is rooted in growing an understanding of servant leadership and community engagement as ways we can express our Catholic faith. We are doing that from a uniquely Spiritan perspective which allows us to talk with the teens at length about the importance of relationships and meeting people where they are,” said DiMaggio.

Student Leaders

Interested students completed an application and submitted essays in which they discussed their interest in the program and described how faith has impacted their lives. Students were selected based on their leadership potential, or by demonstrating aspirational signs of leadership.

Admission wasn’t just limited to student council presidents or athletic team captains. The group also included “quiet leaders,” according to Rev. James McCloskey, C.S.Sp., senior advisor to the president for strategic initiatives.

“They’re the ones who influence their peers. They’re students who try out for the basketball team and don’t make it, but who then volunteer to manage the team,” explained McCloskey, who was instrumental in promoting DULA and bringing the program to fruition.

And everyone brought something different to the table. The group included students from all backgrounds—from athletes to forensics champions to budding scientists. This diversity meant participants not only learned from their experiences, but from each other.

“I feel like there’s nothing better than to learn who people are. When I travel or when I do these types of service projects, it’s to know the people; to know the area,” said Juliana Gahr, 17, a student at Seton LaSalle Catholic High School.
Current Duquesne students functioned as program leaders and facilitated these conversations.

“Duquesne students and staff are not just great counselors, but also great role models for the type of person that I hope to be,” said Tyler Schmidt, 16, a student at Holy Ghost Prep, a Catholic school founded by the Spiritans and located near Philadelphia.

Morning and evening prayers and reflections let students look back on their days, listen to the perspectives of their peers and link the ideas of servant leadership and service with the scriptural themes of the day.

“What’s nice is to see other people’s opinions, and see how maybe their perspectives changed, and understand what it means to each of us to be a servant leader,” said Neiderlander.

There was no shortage of fun, either. Students enjoyed off-campus activities, including a trip to Kennywood Park, bowling at Arsenal Lanes in Pittsburgh’s Lawrenceville neighborhood and dinner on Mount Washington with Duquesne President Ken Gormley.

Distinctly Spiritan

While other Catholic colleges and universities offer summer programs to high school students, including Boston College and the University of Notre Dame, Duquesne’s program offers a distinct difference.

“The community engagement aspect makes us unique and specifically Spiritan,” explained McCloskey. “DULA is very much aligned with the Spiritan commitment to the poor and disadvantaged, and the spirit of reciprocity. We’re not just helping. We’re listening and learning.”

Through community engagement, students experienced the power of immersion in activities that benefited neighbors and local communities. Under the supervision of mentors and dedicated community leaders, students discovered the impact of cooperation and team-building while examining issues of empathy and effective service.

The DULA schedule was constructed using Duquesne’s abundant community connections to maximize impact for participants and partner organizations. In addition to the ARYSE poster project, the teens sorted supplies for St. Vincent de Paul and toured the Hill District with community leaders to learn more about the neighborhood’s rich history and areas of opportunity.

Schmidt was particularly inspired by the Hill District tour. “We’re able to see the story and the history behind all the people of Pittsburgh, as well as learn about justice and charity,” he said.

Wasilko agreed. “We wanted the program to be memorable and distinctly Duquesne and Pittsburgh. We looked at scriptural themes and related them to the Spiritan founding mission and then decided which community sites would give the best examples of those themes,” he said.

Moving Forward as Servant Leaders

Program leaders are confident DULA will leave a lasting mark.

“Many people don’t realize there was a prep school component to the University for many years. It’s exciting to bring back one of our past traditions and reimagine it for today’s high school students.”

What is a Servant Leader?

“The servant-leader is servant first... It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve first. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. That person is sharply different from one who is leader first, perhaps because of the need to assuage an unusual power drive or to acquire material possessions...”

“We hope the teens leave with a sense of what it means to lead by supporting and serving others, and with a better grasp of what it means to walk with those on the margins,” said DiMaggio.

DULA participants embraced the program—realizing the value of each experience—and promised to continue these important conversations.

“Whether it’s a service activity, whether it’s a talk, or just going and having fun at night, it’s all part of one collective experience that is incredible,” said Gahr.

Neiderlander pledged to bring an open heart and mind back to his high school. “Oftentimes people’s stories aren’t heard, and I think that’s the most important thing...just to get an open space for people to create dialogue,” he said.

“We all have our own identity. So why not share it with others?”

About Duquesne Prep
Duquesne University was founded as the Pittsburgh Catholic College of the Holy Ghost in 1878, serving as a prep school and a college. The prep school included a grammar school and a high school and accepted students as young as 8 years old. For 33 years, the prep school operated as such, until 1911 when the college was granted University status and changed its name to Duquesne University.

While the University no longer accepted grammar school students, the high school continued to thrive, and at one time it was the largest Catholic school in the diocese. Although the prep program ended in 1941, its legacy remains and serves as inspiration for DULA.

Visit duq.edu/magazine and learn about the DULA experience from the perspective of the students involved.