SAS Honors Program
Scholarly Academic Report
Option E
IWL Leadership Scholars Program
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Description of the Leadership Scholars Program

The Leadership Scholars Program (LSP) in the Institute for Women's Leadership (IWL) is an undergraduate certificate program focusing on women's leadership through social change. The two-year program admits second and third-year students at Rutgers University who have demonstrated significant potential and interest in the field of women's leadership. As part of the Leadership Scholars Program, scholars are required to complete nineteen credits of coursework, a semester-long internship, and, most importantly, a Social Action Project relating to a policy field of their choosing.

Leadership Scholars complete the Social Action Project in their second and final year in the program. The scholars are responsible for designing and implementing the project, budgeting, writing a grant proposal, and compiling a project portfolio by the end of the academic year, and each scholar is awarded a $500 seed grant by the Institute for Women's Leadership to be used in securing materials to be used in the completion of the project. Past projects have included interview series, documentary films, candlelight vigils, and panel presentations. The project is meant to be a merging of the theoretical knowledge gained in the classroom about women's leadership and Women's and Gender Studies and the practical and experiential knowledge that can be gained through grassroots and community organizing.

My choice to complete the School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program Capstone Requirement through Option E—as opposed to the writing of a

Departmental or Interdisciplinary Honors Thesis — is intricately tied to the mission of the Social Action Project. The Interdisciplinary Honors Thesis was initially one of the elements that had most attracted me to the SAS Honors Program — as a Political Science major with minors in both Economics and Women's and Gender Studies, I have tried my best to tailor my academic experience to fit into the intersections of these three fields, and the option to write an interdisciplinary thesis was attractive to me. However, I began to realize, partially through my experience in the LSP, that while I had an interest in academia and in research, I felt a stronger pull towards activism and advocacy.

I have personally been involved in grassroots organizing and activism since my first year at Rutgers. For four years, I have served on the Young Women of Color Leadership Council, a project of the organization Advocates for Youth that focuses on doing grassroots organizing around reproductive justice issues facing young women of color. In thinking about my Capstone, I began to realize that while writing a thesis, particularly in a field like Women's and Gender Studies, might be valuable to me, it may not necessarily be valuable to the community. In the poem, "gender studies," which reflects on academia and research done on marginalized communities by non-marginalized peoples, artist and spoken-word poet Alok Vaid-Menon writes:

> **One.**
>
> Dear Cym: In America I am learning how to think that I am better than you.

In fact, I am majoring in you. Don't worry, they don't use your name,

keep it confidential

Two.

I am turning your body into a new theory

Don't worry they will pay me to use you,

I will cut you some profit in my acknowledgements.

Three.

My thesis will be in English,

In the accent you heard on re-runs of *Friends*, Cym I'm sorry we

weren't friends, but I wanted to keep it *professional*

I promise I will print it on the whitest paper I can find,

So they can see the black in your words

Four.

I will bury you in a library,

I hope you will find home there

In this haunted house of quotations

Hanging on the shelves like skeletons (2015)

Vaid-Menon writes about their[1] own experiences in writing an undergraduate Gender studies thesis, likely the type of thesis I would have also sought to write, but describes the irony of writing in a language (English and/or academic language) that is inaccessible to the thesis' subjects. I was apprehensive that in writing a

[1] Note: Vaid-Menon uses they/them pronouns

thesis, not only would I not be able to create the kind of community impact that I desired to, but that I might also cause harm by doing research on and, essentially, taking intellectual advantage of marginalized groups that I am not a part of.

The Social Action Project was, in my opinion, the best answer to this problem. The project itself requires researching the area of interest and compiling an over fifty-page portfolio that includes an analysis of relevant scholarly literature and an analysis of the results of the project. The Social Action Project allows Leadership Scholars to conduct research and analyze Women's and Gender Studies theory, which I was afraid of missing out on by choosing not to do a thesis, but then mobilizes that theory into tangible results through activism and advocacy, creating positive change for the New Brunswick community.

Description of Project & Methodology

"Out of Silence" is a play developed for the 1 in 3 Campaign, a project of Advocates for Youth. The goal of the 1 in 3 Campaign is to reduce abortion stigma through the sharing of abortion stories and creating empathetic, compassionate conversations about abortion. "Out of Silence" follows from this goal and is made up of twelve vignettes, each one telling a different abortion story. The play was written by several female playwrights and, as a result, each vignette is stylistically and topically distinct from the others, which creates a more nuanced and contextualized look at abortion.

Though "Out of Silence" focuses on abortion, it decidedly does not discuss abortion from either a "pro-choice" or "pro-life" standpoint. As a project, "Out of

Silence" aims to move past the binary of "pro-life" vs. "pro-choice," seeing that this polarizing rhetoric is harmful and non-representative of the people who have abortions. In an article titled "Beyond Pro-Choice Versus Pro-Life: Women of Color and Reproductive Justice," Andrea Smith begins to break down how both the "pro-choice" and "pro-life" camps are harmful, particularly to people of color and indigenous people, in the ways that they engage with oppressive structures such as white supremacy and capitalism. "Pro-life" groups, she argues, seek to criminalize abortion, and thus engage with a criminal justice system that has historically oppressed people of color and that has also been proven to be ineffective at reducing crime. This, she says, "suggests that what distinguishes the pro-life position is not so much a commitment to life (since criminalization promotes death rather than life, particularly in communities of color and poor communities), but rather a commitment to criminal justice interventions in reproductive justice issues" (Smith, 123). Smith also engages critically with people and organizations that take a pro-choice stance. She mentions that the history of abortion activism and of organizations like Planned Parenthood is inextricable from a history of racism, eugenics, and forced sterilization. Additionally, a choice paradigm sustains the marginalization of people of color and poor people, by directing policy initiatives away from the needs of those communities: "one example is the extent to which pro-choice advocates narrow their advocacy around legislation that affects the one choice of whether or not to have an abortion without addressing all the conditions

that gave rise to a woman having to make this decision in the first place" (Smith, 129).

In their article, Aspen Baker and Carolina De Robertis name their grievances with the pro-life/pro-choice dichotomy as well:

> Pro-life groups have not only been successful at connecting their version of moral values to legislative action, they are effectively connecting people's emotional response to abortion with their own attempts to criminalize it. In response, pro-choice organizations have narrowed their context and frame for talking about people's individual experiences. As a result, the pro-life and pro-choice frames collided and together they created a terrain of unacceptable emotions (Baker and De Robertis, 3).

Baker and De Robertis assert that the pro-life and pro-choice frameworks inherently politicize abortion and dismiss the feelings of those who have them. In response to the arguments against a pro-life versus pro-choice framework, Baker and De Robertis suggest moving to a new framework that they refer to as "pro-voice." The pro-voice framework was developed out of their work on the Exhale abortion talkline and through a realization that the personal stories of people who have abortions, those that are not filtered through political agendas, need to have a platform. Pro-voice advocates that people listen to those who have abortions and that those who have abortions speak openly about their experiences in order to create a conversational environment around abortion that is nuanced, contextual,

and diverse. According to Baker and De Robertis, "Pro-voice doesn't demand that people forsake their own values or change them. Rather, it offers a context for recognizing one's own values while respecting those of others. This, in turn, creates an approach to discussing abortion that centers on—and thereby includes—the lens and context of the women who have them, and the families and communities in which they are members" (Baker and De Robertis, 10).

Because "Out of Silence" is a play about contextualizing abortion stories, it seemed only fitting that I approach its implementation through a pro-voice framework. Utilizing the pro-voice framework is the best alternative to the pro-choice framework, which, as Smith, Baker, and De Robertis have pointed out, reproduce systems of white supremacy and end up rendering voiceless those whose abortion experiences fall into the "terrain of unacceptable emotions." In keeping with the spirit of the project, I sought to be conscious of my theoretical grounding in this framework and made sure to give each story an equal, judgement-free platform.

However, my project was not just to put on a performance of "Out of Silence" at Rutgers, but to do so in a way that would address some of my personal concerns about abortion storytelling, namely, the lack of diversity among popularized abortion stories in the media. In my experience, the abortion stories that receive the most attention are the ones that center (upper-) middle class, white, straight, cisgender women who, more often than not, have a supportive partner or parent or friend to help guide them through the process. I wanted my performance of "Out of Silence" to disrupt this narrative and give visibility to people of color, queer people,

trans people, disabled people who have abortions. I also wanted my project to have a measurable impact beyond just consciousness-raising, and so decided to also use the platform of my event to raise money for the New Jersey Abortion Access Fund, which provides financial assistance to people seeking abortion care who might not be able to afford it otherwise.

To find cast members as well as attendees, I used social media as a tool to reach people. My personal networks have a large number of people who are interested in this type of event so reaching out to those networks proved useful. I particularly sought out cast members of diverse race, gender, and sexual identity, again because the common abortion narrative often features a white, straight, middle-class cisgender woman, as I had hoped for my project to showcase the myriad identities of people who get abortions.

Most importantly, my methodology for producing and directing the play was entirely collaborative. The Leadership Scholars Program seeks to explore diverse leadership styles outside of a typical hierarchical leadership model, with one person at the top. As an alternative, we in the program frequently discussed the benefits to a feminist approach to leadership, one that is more horizontal and values contributions from multiple team members. It was important that, as a Leadership Scholar, I implemented the leadership style we discussed in class. As a result, all decisions were made collectively by myself and my cast members. This proved beneficial, as my cast had a diverse set of skills, and we were able to fill in the gaps in each other's knowledge and showcase our unique abilities.

My specific choice to make abortion the focus of my Social Action Project drew on my long-time passion for reproductive justice work. Since my senior year of high school, I have been involved in reproductive and sexual health education and activism as a peer educator, advocate, and intern for a number of different organizations. Beyond my work with the Young Women of Color Leadership Council, I also had the opportunity to intern in the Public Affairs department at Planned Parenthood of New York City in the summer of 2015. This was the same summer that a pro-life organization, The Center for Medical Progress, released video footage alleging that Planned Parenthood was profiting from the sale of fetal tissue obtained as a result of abortion. The role of the Public Affairs team changed drastically after the release of the videos, and I spent much of my internship working to organize events to help combat the attacks against the organization. I saw firsthand the vitriol and the violent attitudes people held against people who have abortions and people who provide them, and though I have always been passionate about reproductive health care, my experiences this summer demonstrated to me the importance of defending the rights of all people to make decisions about their own bodies.

As an intern, I also had the opportunity to attend the Planned Parenthood Generation Action National Conference, where I first saw a performance of "Out of Silence." I was already on the fence about carrying out my initial idea for my Social Action Project—a workshop on teen dating violence in the South Asian community, which is an important issue but not one I felt as passionately about—and upon seeing the performance of the play I knew that this was the route that I wanted to

take. The play would not only serve as activism and social action, but also as a piece of art, combining messaging and learning with expression and engagement. The combining of art (specifically, theatre) and activism is not a new one; Augusto Boal's "Theatre of the Oppressed," for example, was developed in 1960s Brazil as a means of creating social and political change through audience engagement. More recently, former Columbia student and artist Emma Sulcowicz carried her dorm room mattress around with her everywhere she went as a performance piece about campus sexual assault. Performing "Out of Silence" was, in my opinion, a way to show that art and expression can be used as tools for social change.

Project Outcomes

External Outcomes

The event's outcomes exceeded my expectations in both physical and interpersonal results. Despite a last-minute location change, "Out of Silence" brought in roughly thirty audience members from across the Rutgers community—including undergraduates, graduate students, and staff—and raised $205 for the New Jersey Abortion Access Fund. In order to make the event accessible to everyone and to attract the largest audience possible, there was no price of admission. Instead, I encouraged all attendees to contribute a suggested donation of $5. I incentivized donating by using a large portion of my grant funding to put together two raffle baskets. For each dollar donated, the attendee would receive one raffle ticket to put towards the basket of their choice. Based on my conversations with audience members, the raffle ended up being one of the biggest

draws to the event and encouraged several people to give above the suggested amount.

My conversations with audience members also gave me some insight into how the play impacted them emotionally and psychologically. A number of people thanked me for putting the event on and for opening this conversation up at Rutgers. One woman in particular told me that she saw her own abortion story in one of the vignettes, and was thankful that this point of view was being brought to light. My main objective for "Out of Silence" was to inspire conversation about abortion at Rutgers and to help people who have received abortions feel like their stories are valid and are being heard. Based on the audience response that I saw, I can safely say that I accomplished this goal.

Internal Outcomes & Personal Growth

Through the process of completing the Capstone, I have learned a few things about myself that reinforced many of the ideas of feminist leadership I have learned through the IWL. The most important lesson that this project reinforced for me was importance of collaborative leadership and coalition building. My project, because it involved having a cast and, to some extent, being dependent on other people to finish the project, has forced me to become more comfortable with delegating. While I have been involved in collaborative leadership structures before, it is rare that I have the job of delegating tasks to others, so I have been gaining the skills to do that throughout my project. I have also had to learn to rely on building partnerships and how to deal with when those partnerships end up not working out. I quickly realized

as I started to implement this project just how inexperienced I was with theatrical production and that I would need to use the existing partnerships and friendships that I have to get support for my project. Through realizing this, I was able to reach out to Cabaret Theatre and attempt to solicit support from them. Unfortunately, it ended up not working out the way I had hoped, and so I also learned how to diplomatically deal with that rejection and develop alternative plans. These lessons reinforced for me the idea of feminist leadership as being horizontal and connective. Feminist leadership, in the service of social change, relies on relationship building—with close colleagues as well as outside partners—in order to create a valuable impact.

Much of the personal growth that occurred during this process can be attributed to the obstacles I faced and the steps I took to overcome those obstacles. Traditionally, the Social Action Project is to be completed in the first semester of the second year of the program, in conjunction with the Social Action Project Seminar coursework. However, changing my project topic over the summer set me at a significant disadvantage; many of my colleagues in the program began work on their project before the start of the school year, but my change in topic meant that I could only begin work on it once the fall semester began.

By far the most challenging obstacle I faced was securing a performance space. During the fall semester, I reached out to Cabaret Theatre to request that they take on my show as a special project. After some miscommunication and a series of delays, they ultimately told me that they could not take my show on, at a point

where it was too late to attempt to secure another space on campus. I then decided to postpone the project until the spring and re-submitted my proposal to Cabaret, which they then accepted. However, again due to some miscommunication on the part of Cabaret Theatre, less than twenty-four hours before the show, I was told that the space had not actually been reserved. Eventually, the situation was resolved and the show moved elsewhere on campus.

While these issues were difficult and frustrating to deal with, I learned a significant amount through having to resolve them. These obstacles challenged me to think on my feet and develop alternative plans in a short period of time. I learned to remain patient when confronted with mistakes that were not mine, and to remain polite and cordial when faced with disappointment or failure on the part of another person.

Review of Scholarly Literature

Abortion Myths

Those in favor of criminalizing abortion often cite that there are a number of truths being covered up by the so-called "abortion industry." Some of these claims include supposed potential health risks of abortion care, that abortion causes breast cancer, for example. Guo et al's meta-analysis of fifteen prospective studies examining the relationship between induced and spontaneous (miscarriage) abortion and breast cancer (2015). They calculated a relative risk (RR) for each of these populations, which measures the probability of breast cancer occurring in either abortion group against the probability of breast cancer occurring in people

who have not had an induced abortion or miscarriage. They found that, across the fifteen studies, the composite RR was 1.00 for those who had induced abortion and 1.02 for those who had miscarried, demonstrating that there is no increased risk among people who have had an abortion (either induced or spontaneous) when compared to people who have not had an abortion.

Another health-related claim often made about abortion is that it is a direct cause of mental health issues among people who have had one in the past. One meta-analysis done by Coleman and investigated by Steinberg et al. (2012) concluded that abortion increases a woman's risk of having a mental health condition by 81% and that 10% of mental health conditions can be attributed to having had an abortion in the past. Steinberg et al. isolate seven major flaws in the Coleman meta-analysis. Some of the flaws they pointed out include assumption of causation in the conclusion that 10% of mental health conditions are directly due to abortion, not adhering to their own criteria of inclusion and exclusion of studies to analyze, and making an invalid reference regarding the percentage of unintended births from a statistic about unintended pregnancy. They also examine shortcomings in individual studies in the meta-analysis, specifically regarding factors such as measurement of mental health outcomes and methods for controlling for prior mental health conditions. Steinberg et al. conclude that the number and severity of the errors present in the meta-analysis render the conclusions invalid.

Not only is there little to no data to support that abortion causes breast cancer or mental health issues, but also the procedure itself has been found to be remarkably safe in studies like the one done by Raymond and Grimes (2012). Raymond and Grimes estimated the mortality rate associated with live births and legal abortions using data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, birth certificates, and surveys done by the Guttmacher Institute. They found that the mortality rate associated with legal abortions was 0.6 deaths per 100,000 abortions, or, 0.0006%. In comparison, the mortality rate associated with live births was 8.8 deaths per 100,000 births, or, 0.0088%. So, not only is abortion an incredibly safe medical procedure when done legally, but carrying a pregnancy to term and giving birth is roughly fifteen times more deadly than having an abortion.

The abortion rate for people of color, particularly Black and Hispanic people, is disproportionately larger than the abortion rate for white people. Some argue that this disparity is a result of abortion providers specifically targeting communities of color as part of a eugenicist ideology. However, public health professionals such as Dehlendorf, Harris, and Weitz (2013) argue that the racial disparity in the abortion rate is connected to other reproductive healthcare disparities faced by people of color, such as higher rates of unintended pregnancy, lower age of sexual initiation, and lower rates of contraceptive use. Dehlendorf, Harris, and Weitz suggest that these disparities are related to broader social issues, such as socioeconomic status and quality of health care.

Representation of Abortion in Popular Media

The way abortion is represented in popular media can often provide misleading images of the ways abortion affects people's lives or the types of people who get abortions. Sisson and Kimport (2014) conducted a comprehensive study of all instances of pregnancy decision-making and abortion in American television and film. They found an increase in the mention of abortion in television and film starting in the 1980s, with spikes in the 1960s—the sexual revolution—and 1973, the year *Roe v. Wade* was decided. While the increase in mention of abortion reflects a cultural shift towards acceptance, the outcomes of the characters with abortion storylines do not reflect reality. Of the 310 pregnancy decision-making plotlines identified, 13.5% of those plotlines (n=42) ended in the death of the person considering the abortion, whether or not they obtained the procedure. As discussed in Raymond and Grimes's research, abortion has a vastly lower mortality rate than 13.5%. Popular media depictions of abortion add to the persistent myth that it is an unsafe procedure for the person terminating the pregnancy, despite the research that suggests otherwise.

Popular media depictions of abortion also almost exclusively focus on cis-heterosexual relationships, largely due to the assumption that abortion is not an issue for lesbian, bisexual, and queer women. Robson (2011) discusses the specific abortion needs of lesbains, and the heightened barriers that they face to accessing that care. Robson notes that lesbians who have experienced the choicelessness of sexual assault also face a lack of reproductive choice. She points out in addition to this that many women who self-describe as lesbian do not exclusively have sex with

people who have vaginas. However, the presumption that lesbians are not having sex with men (or with transgender women who have penises) has led to lesbians being less informed about pregnancy prevention and therefore more likely to use contraception incorrectly and have an unintended pregnancy. Despite the fact that there is almost certainly a population of lesbians who have had an abortion, albeit likely a small one, there is almost no representation of this in the popular media, feeding back into the idea that reproductive healthcare is not a "lesbian issue."

Pro-Choice vs. Pro-Voice

In thinking about abortion, the battle between "pro-life" and "pro-choice" almost immediately comes to mind. While sometimes useful, these categories can often become reductive and not descriptive of the lived experiences of people who have had abortions. Smith (2005) suggests that the ways in which language around "pro-choice" and "pro-life" do not actually do justice or apply to indigenous women and women of color who are looking out for the good of themselves and their communities. She classifies the term "pro-life" as one that generally refers to people who believe abortion should be criminalized as the fetus is a life, and "pro-choice" as one that refers to those who believe abortion should not be criminalized. Smith argues that "pro-choice" activists would be more successful if they contested the pro-life position from an anti-prison standpoint, as poor women and women of color increasingly find their pregnancies, terminations, and miscarriages criminalized.

Baker and De Robertis (2005) offer a third, alternative framework for talking about abortion called "pro-voice." Baker, the founder of the abortion counseling

hotline Exhale, coined the term after listening to the stories of those who called Exhale. Pro-voice aims to center the narratives, needs, and voices of people have had abortions without judgement or politicization. Pro-voice, Baker and De Robertis argue, allows for people to have complex, nuanced discussions about their abortions that go beyond the pro-life/pro-choice binary and to express a full range of emotions about their experiences.

Conclusion

My experience in the IWL Leadership Scholars Program has been an integral part of my undergraduate experience. The LSP pushed me as a student; I took on nineteen extra credits of Women's and Gender Studies Courses, which encouraged me to pursue Women's and Gender Studies as an additional minor course of study on top of my major in Political Science and my minor in Economics. I completed a semester-long internship with the Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities while simultaneously identifying the specific needs and challenges of women in the workplace. I was able to accomplish a project that was not only research-intensive but also achieved tangible, real-world results and that provided me with important experiences and skills such as grant-writing, budgeting, and event-planning.

Beyond my academic experience, though, I gained an invaluable knowledge and mastery of effective leadership strategies for social change. Coming into the program, I assumed that leadership meant one leader at the top, delegating down to others. Now, I understand that effective leadership can also be horizontal,

collaborative, and highlight the strengths of the collective as opposed to the strengths of the individual. This is a style of leadership I plan to practice throughout my life, particularly as I end my undergraduate career. The IWL Leadership Scholars Program enriched my undergraduate experience, both academically and personally, and was a fitting Capstone to my time at Rutgers and my time in the School of Arts and Sciences Honors Program.

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