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# LAUNCHING LEADERSHIP IN HAITI

An Overview of Vanderbilt's Haiti Leadership  
for Young People Program Pilot

VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY 2019





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# A SCHOOL ON A HILL



## MUSAC, HAITI

From the roof of the school building you get the impression you are standing on the top of the world. In every direction, steep hills cloaked in dense green foliage fall away under the sagging bellies of white and grey clouds. The midday July sun, still fresh after its short trip from the equator, tosses shadows of the clouds across the lushier than normal hills. But the pink-hued building on the pocket of flat ground carved into the bluff edge of this mountain avoids the cloud cover; the sun blazes past a few tendrils of weak clouds, baking the rooftop and slanting into the open holes cut in the classroom walls to maximize ventilation. Across the valley, one can almost follow with their



eyes the winding roads that lead down the hills and back to the edge of the island where Port-au-Prince squats on the ocean's edge.

Musac is not the top of the world. On an island of small mountains, it has the elevation of the American heartland. The tallest peak in Haiti, an average mountain by global standards, would tower over the town if tectonic shifting had made them neighbors. This is the visual trick of the Haitian landscape, all those mountains crowding into each other in rugged chunks of topography, the flattened fields requiring a 45-degree head tilt to imagine a modern plow tilling the sheer hill faces, and always on the periphery, ocean and clouds give the constant impression that you are standing at the very top of a vast expanse of land. It is also the mental trick of Haiti, all the potential crowding in to make the history, politics and natural disasters seem— for just a moment in the courtyard of this school— to be happening somewhere far across mountains, beyond the gravelly soccer pitch, down the potholed roads. It's a powerful trick, and it's a purposeful one; to give students the opportunity to reach their full potential, it is necessary to give them the tools and space to see themselves and their country from the top of the world.

This idea that potential is foundational in the country and will grow if given opportunities is at the core of the education mission at the Institut Paroissial D'Education et de Promotion (IPEPH), a secondary school in Musac, Haiti where middle and high schoolers study everything from English to chemistry. The mission of the school goes beyond academic success. Since 1992, the Nashville Cathedral Haiti Mission has provided support to the schools in the St. Jean-Baptiste parish in service of their mission to "improve the educational, spiritual and health status of the young people" of the parish. Tom Cigarran, one of the driving forces behind the creation of the school, imbued the program with a powerful undertaking and he is not shy about reminding the students and teachers of their purpose for being at

## The Nashville Cathedral Haiti Mission

In 1992, the NCHM developed a non-profit to support the parish twinning program between the **Saint Jean Baptiste Parish in Haiti** and **Cathedral of the Incarnation in Nashville, TN**. The mission supports the establishment and maintenance of:

- **Grade School**
- **High School (IPEPH)**
- **College Scholarship**
- **Medical and Dental Mission**

The NCHM serves a catchment area of roughly 50,000 people living in the La Vallée de Jacmel region. Today, the schools and dental mission serve hundreds of Haitian students and their families and communities.



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IPEPH: educating the future leaders of Haiti.

There is weight to those words and no one involved in the program lasts if they are not motivated enough to bear some of that load. The students, who commit to staying in Haiti to complete their university work and to entering the local workforce for at least one year after graduation, understand that IPEPH is about more than their individual success.

"This isn't about students doing well on their tests so they can move to the US and get a good paying job," Cigarran explains. "This is about creating systemic change in Haiti, in making sure the country has leaders who are ready and able to do the work."

What does it take to make "future leaders" in a developing country that is trying to overcome its painful history, recover from natural disaster and successfully ride out current political turbulence? Anyone who has worked in education, especially in under-resourced,

environments, knows there is nothing simple about the answer to that question. It takes money, time, dedicated educators, research-backed programs, etc. At IPEPH, though, there is a certain secret ingredient that becomes clear even before you interact with the students: high expectations.

There is a temptation when considering the education of students in under resourced classrooms to lower the bar and change to a "just" mindset: "Let's just make sure they graduate" or "It will be a success if they can just find any job with their degree." And it's true that some students will "just" reach those marks. However, if the target is set much higher than these "just" goals, a majority of students and the communities supporting them will strive to reach beyond what they originally thought possible to expect of themselves. At IPEPH, there is no "just" built into the expectations and nothing highlights that better than the launch of an intensive leadership training program.





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# A LEADERSHIP PROGRAM IS BORN

NASHVILLE, TN

Over the course of two days in July 2019, Dr. Susan Douglas and Leanne Gossels, respectively a professor and a Master's student in Vanderbilt's Leadership and Organizational Performance (LOP) program, kicked off a leadership training curriculum specifically designed for high school students and recent college graduates in Haiti. The program was born after Douglas, who has been involved in the NCHM's dental mission for several years, learned about the education mission and its "future leaders of Haiti" from Cigarran. As the director of the LOP program at Vanderbilt, Douglas spends a lot of time considering how to cultivate the development of leadership competencies, so she couldn't resist asking, "How are you actually teaching the students leadership?"

She would end up being the one to answer that question.

To begin exploring how best to approach the idea of leadership development for young people in the Haitian cultural context, Douglas reached out to her network of leadership professionals in Nashville for resources. She also connected with the Center for Creative Leadership ([www.ccl.org](http://www.ccl.org)) to learn more about their leadership frameworks and philosophies as a global organization. In May, Douglas recruited two LOP graduate students, Casey Stangel and Gossels, to help with the project. Stangel assisted with the project evaluation and Gossels took the lead on integrating the many resources to build a streamlined curriculum for the program from the ground up. The leadership training program would need to:



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- i. rely on a program design ensuring feasibility and replicability;**
  - ii. harness best practices in education in order to teach for behavior change as well as knowledge growth;**
  - iii. accommodate an intensive conversational English program for level 3 (intermediate) language learners;**
  - iv. account for cultural differences;**
  - v. deliver practical, up-to-date, and evidence-based leadership capabilities.**

This leadership training program would above all else give the students an understanding of why the expectations had been so high all along– They were already leaders, they now needed the language and practice to not only act like it, but to believe it.



# THE ANATOMY OF A LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

## I. PROGRAM DESIGN ENSURING FEASIBILITY AND REPLICABILITY

Early on it was clear that the existing summer English immersion program provided an ideal opportunity to launch the first iteration of the program. It was important to Douglas from the beginning that leadership lessons be interwoven throughout the rest of the students' days. "What we know about teaching kids leadership, is that if you teach leadership in a specific window of time as if it's a math class, they only use what they've learned while they're in the room. If you make leadership part of another subject or teach it throughout the day, week and year, it becomes part of their habits." Since the Vanderbilt team could not be in Haiti for the entire summer, the curriculum development team settled on a two-day intensive design that would allow them to kick off the program,

teach the foundational concepts, and then turn the teaching over to the English teachers who would be present all summer. After the Vanderbilt team left, students would continue their leadership practice three days a week for four more weeks during their "Activity Hour." This decision to use the activity hour facilitated by an English teacher, influenced how the Vanderbilt team designed each week, shaping the curriculum to prioritize group and class activities, videos with discussion, and public speaking exercises while minimizing the amount of time dedicated to lectures. In addition to creating a program that was feasible and effective it was also important to the team to build evaluative measures into the design in order to determine whether or not the program was effective qualitatively and quantitatively. Evaluating a program's outcomes is key to seeing what is and isn't working so that the program can be improved and replicated in a meaningful



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way in the future. The program materials contain a brief survey for the teacher to complete after each class with feedback on successful completion of learning objectives and an option to offer recommendations based on their experience. **The final ingredient for creating the program design was identifying key goals and orienting the curriculum to those goals. The program goals: materials were culturally appropriate and could be delivered by conversational English teachers; engagement would increase students' knowledge of leadership and give students experience in leading themselves, leading others, and impacting their environments; and it would give students a guided opportunity to apply this experience to a personal improvement project that would help them on their journey to becoming a "future leader of Haiti."**[1]

## II. BEST PRACTICES IN EDUCATION

Any leadership training curriculum must be built on a foundation of best practices in education. Teaching leadership relies on more than simple information exchange. For the leadership training program to be successful, students must not only know about leadership, they must also change their attitudes about leadership and change their behavior to reflect what they have learned.[2] The future leaders of Haiti must indeed become leaders, not just be able to recognize leadership in others. Before Gossels and Douglas even finalized what content to include in the program, they determined that the training would take a modular approach, with students learning from pedagogy/lecture, video content, and classroom activities each day during the intensive and each week throughout the summer. This design allowed for variety, repetition, role modeling, and hands-on practice.

As the Vanderbilt team began creating the curriculum they were sure to center it on research-backed principles for teaching from experts in the field of education. Since students' prior knowledge can help or hinder learning, they would ground the lessons in content that was familiar to students' lived experience and give opportunities for students to ask those "what about this..?" questions that arose when they disagreed with something the teachers said.[2] The Vanderbilt team was careful to organize the information in a way that would enhance the learning. This emphasis on knowledge organization determined what would appear in each of the weekly and daily modules, how much practice would take place, hands-on and written exercises to deepen intentional engagement. This design also allowed students to develop mastery of a concept because the curriculum laid out some background on a new skill with time for in-class practice and feedback, followed by opportunities for students to apply the new skill on their own during unrelated moments outside of class.[3] Centering the learning around a summer project made the work goal-directed, and regular share-outs and group work time allowed facilitators to give real-time feedback. Operating from the understanding that the social, emotional and intellectual climate of the learning environment affects how students learn, the team intentionally tried to create a learning environment of openness, honesty, and security.[3]

The Vanderbilt facilitators started this process from the introduction at the beginning of the program with a slide declaring a code of conduct and expectations for learning engagement, as seen in figure 1. They also built flexibility into the learning activities so that they could encourage students to learn in ways that best suited them and give them a safe environment to explore their intellectual curiosities and take risks. One aspect of teaching they were not fully prepared for was the intensity of the students' motivation. They built goal-

**In order to become  
great leaders, we  
have to act like  
leaders.**

**So, in this room we will:**

- Treat others with respect.
- Try new things (even if we are embarrassed or nervous!)
- Challenge ourselves.
- Listen to others.
- Support each other.
- Be honest.
- Ask for help when we need it.
- Offer help when we can.

*Figure 1.*

setting and the “why” behind what they were doing into the curriculum with the idea that it could inspire motivation in the students. By building this in they had even more opportunity to recognize the students’ high level of motivation, and frame it for them as a leadership competency. The IPEPH students were impressively motivated, focused, and dedicated in their approach to the work. They showed up excited and eager to learn new knowledge, demonstrated their engagement through thoughtful questions and requests for more information, and acted with professionalism and maturity to make sure everyone in the room was able to learn as much as possible. At the completion of the program, the students requested further resources and asked for support in creating a WhatsApp group to continue the conversation about leadership. Their positive attitudes towards leadership and learning surpassed any motivator the team could have created. This motivation proved a powerful force in the classroom experience, overcoming any language limits, technological hiccups and fatigue to make the intensive successful.

### **III. LANGUAGE ACCOMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS’ ENGLISH LEVEL**

Before the Vanderbilt team began developing the curriculum they familiarized themselves with the language levels of the students in the program. IPEPH students participate in an intensive English summer program each year, getting placed into classes based on the National Geographic ESL curriculum. [5] The summer English program coordinator, Kirsten Fox, determined that the intensive would include students in the Level 3 class- intermediate language learners. While these students have taken English classes with some regularity and some have solid conversational skills, the curriculum would need to utilize simple enough language to convey the concepts such that language would not be a barrier.

The first priority of the program was to teach leadership so the team set expectations around language in class to make sure students first learned the concepts with a secondary goal of



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practicing English. English teachers who had already worked with the students gave input to ensure the materials were in line with the students' English level. Their review of the curriculum before its launch was integral in shaping the final wording, how the materials used vocabulary, and the video and images selected. For example, the teachers raised concerns about the rapid pace of English speaking in selected videos so the curriculum included versions that had French subtitles. In practice, this modification helped, but the teachers' concerns proved all too true. On the first day of the intensive, the Vanderbilt team showed Drew Dudley's TedTalk, "Everyday Leadership" to some of the students and the students let the facilitators know that they were not following Dudley's rapid-fire story despite the subtitles[6]. The team modified the program at this point to include transcripts of all of the videos in English and French so that students could follow along while watching the videos and have the reading for additional study.

Students were provided with a personal journal that included key concepts and prompts in written form that corresponded to lectures and discussions in the class. Having these key points in written form made it possible for students to read instead of listening and to go back to see some of the vocabulary they might have missed. When the team handed the journals out to students they made sure to emphasize that these journals were for their use and as such they should feel free to write in both Creole and English.

Spoken Creole played an important role as well. Throughout the program the facilitators relied on the help of advanced English speakers in the classroom to translate difficult concepts, words and questions. This use of Creole had the added benefit of making students more at ease, building a sense of community, and most important, giving students the opportunity to role model leadership as they offered to help and spoke in front of the class. The English teachers were an

invaluable resource, especially in the first couple hours of the program. Since the Vanderbilt team was new to teaching at IPEPH, they provided real-time feedback on speaking speed and delivery. They also role modeled how to circulate throughout the room, offering one-on-one and small group help with language questions. This proved immensely helpful for our two American high school students who served in this role for the two-day intensive.

## **IV. ACCOUNT FOR CULTURAL DIFFERENCES**

Throughout the program development process, the Vanderbilt team sought outside resources and the perspectives of people with more knowledge of the culture of Haiti. They knew the program would need to be tailored to meet the needs of students who had different lived experiences and exposure to leadership concepts than the American students who were typically the subject of the leadership materials reviewed in the program. They were intentional in the videos and images they selected, making sure to showcase diverse leaders and learners. Additionally, the team relied on Fox to provide insider information on classroom and school norms that would impact the approach to leadership training in this specific location.

The Vanderbilt team selected the CCL leadership program at this point to inform the scope and framework of the summer-long curriculum. The CCL leadership program aligned with and expanded upon the Vanderbilt leadership competencies as it stemmed from work done in the global setting with leaders at all levels including youth groups.

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## V. PRACTICAL, MODERN AND EVIDENCE-BASED LEADERSHIP CURRICULUM

**Defining Leadership.** Leadership has as many definitions as Haiti has hills. A single word can conjure an endless litany of images for any person you ask: presidents and kings, CEOs and heads of households, priests, teachers, doctors, and lawyers. In fact, many of those examples came from the IPEPH students. Not only did they provide examples of leaders, they were able to provide examples of good leaders and bad leaders, those who had been ineffective and those who had been effective with bad intentions. The first priority then, had to be narrowing the content down to reflect a definition of leadership that was practical, relevant

and ethical. Fortunately, Vanderbilt's Leadership and Organizational Performance department has long been at the cutting edge of teaching leadership as both a concept and an action.[7] The content of the leadership training program grew out of the foundation of the LOP program: the idea that leadership is something any person can do each day by developing attributes, characteristics and actions that let them act as leaders.[7]

With that in mind, the LOP team began to build out a curriculum designed to lead students to an understanding of this modern ideal of leadership, illustrate the attributes and actions that created leadership, and give them the tools to develop those attributes and actions in themselves. First, however, the facilitators allowed them to come to a definition of leadership all their own.





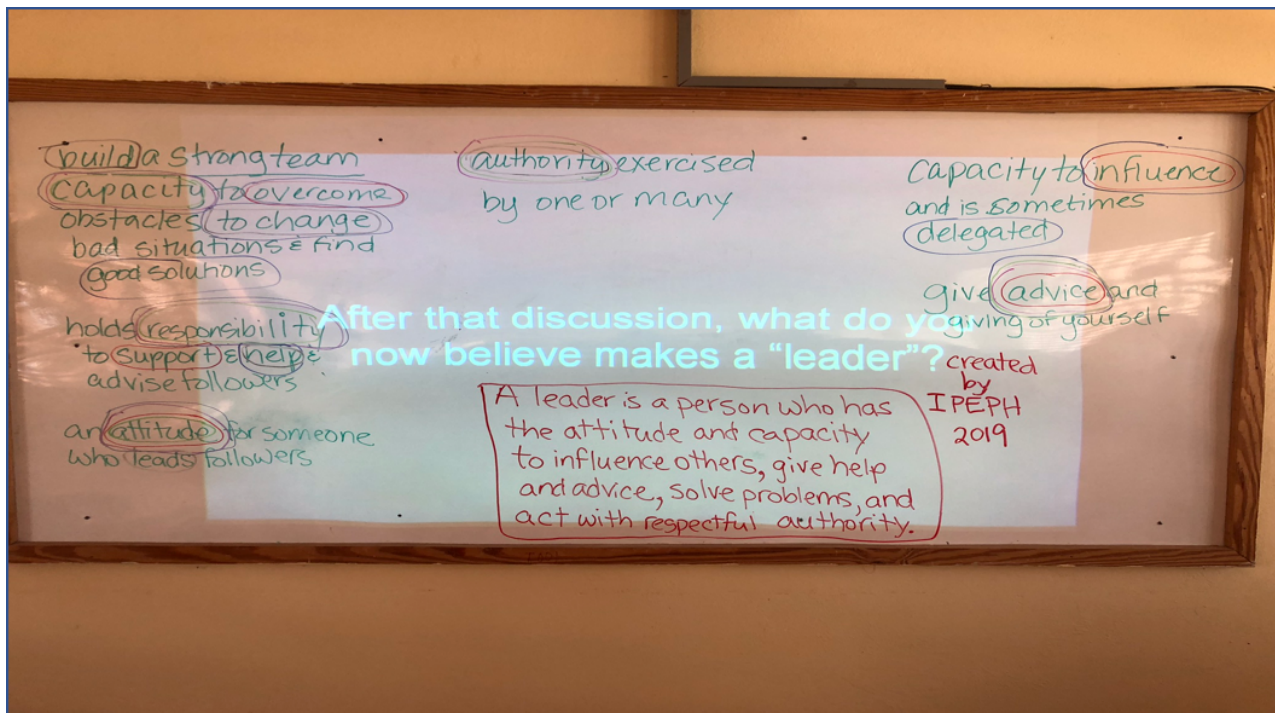


Figure 2.

Through group and class discussion of leadership values, attributes, and actions, the students identified those that kept coming up over and over again as examples. This exposure to different frameworks of leadership allowed the facilitators to narrow down their individual and group definitions into one shared definition that gave them ownership over their understanding of leadership while empowering them to confront their own preconceptions. The definition of a leader that they arrived at as a class is one that captures the idea that leadership is learned, it is attainable, and it is as much about other people as it is about the leader.

In other words, they arrived together through their own exploration of leadership at an understanding of exactly the ideal of leadership we hoped to instill in them over the course of the program:

**“A leader is a person who has the attitude and capacity to influence others, give help and advice, solve problems, and act with respectful authority.”**

From this jumping-off point we were then able to lead them into an exploration of two pillars of good leadership: teamwork and communication.

**Teamwork.** The Center for Creative Leadership’s DAC model of teamwork informed our curriculum on leading and working with teams. CCL’s framework details the factors that a team must have to function well: direction (a shared understanding of the team’s goal), alignment (each team member working in collaboration while completing the responsibilities of their own role), and commitment (each team member having the follow-through to see the team’s goal to fruition.)[9] This framework works nicely in collaboration with Northhouse’s process-driven idea of leadership which relies on an individual to influence and lead, a group of followers, and a problem to solve.[8] The two frameworks allowed facilitators to provide concrete examples that were relatable for the students in the room.

Using examples such as a group project in class or a soccer team trying to win a game, the students were able to fully comprehend the ideas, provide examples of their own, and then discuss their own experiences doing the in-class leadership activities using the vocabulary of DAC.





**Communication.** The other component taught in conjunction with these activities was a communication framework that focuses on effectively sharing ideas, building team engagement, and leading a conversation. The HOUSE model of communication, which Gossels developed for the Vanderbilt Leadership for Young People Program, sits on a foundation of best practices in both personal and professional communication. It emphasizes active listening, information gathering, and checking back with team mates. This manner of communicating, whether used in a boardroom or in a casual coffee chat with friends, instills trust, increases engagement, and boosts the level of knowledge sharing.

## HOUSE Communication Model

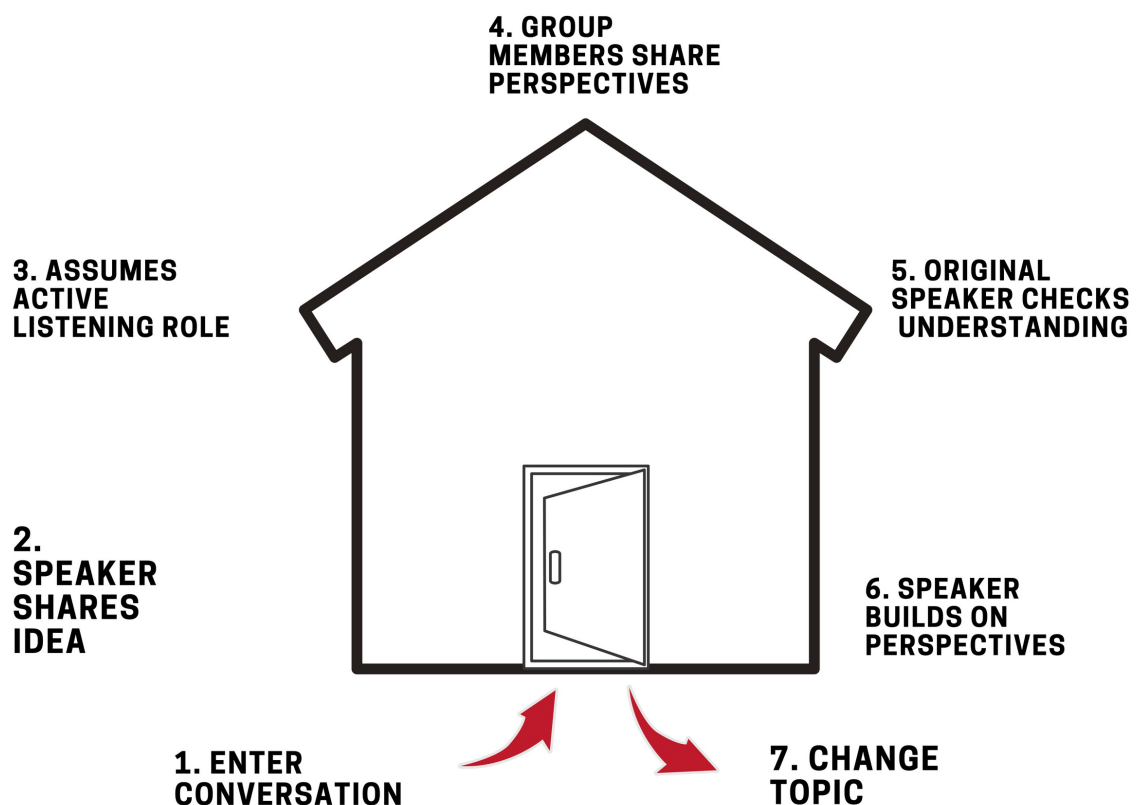


Figure 5.

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**Attributes and Actions.** From this foundation of teamwork and communication, facilitators then began the process of introducing the attributes and actions associated with leadership. They did this by recognizing ways in which the students already demonstrated these competencies and framing these characteristics in ways that aligned with students' lived experiences. Finding analogous leadership capabilities in the students' everyday lives made it possible to define leadership in a way they could better understand from their current vantage point, rather than having them grasp for some abstract and distant objective.

It became abundantly clear these students not only held very high expectations for themselves, they were ready to surpass them. For instance:

Many of the students who attend IPEPH walk two hours to school on steep, dusty roads. They are **resilient**. Thus they can understand resilience in leadership as using that same ability to persevere and work hard in solving a difficult problem among friends or meeting a tight deadline.

Students who arrive late to school or miss a day, must return to school with their parents in order to excuse the absence. Since students are not allowed to bring cell phones to school this requires them to walk home to fetch their parents. They are **accountable**. Thus they can understand accountability in taking ownership of a mistake they make in their portion of a class project.

Some of these students are the first in their families to attend high school and a majority will be the first to go to college. The students abide by strict school rules and uphold high standards of academia by choice, so they are able to stay in the school, graduate, and have a chance at a better future. They are **motivated**. Thus they can understand that to motivate others or harness motivation themselves, they must have a clear outcome in sight, align incentives with priorities, and know and believe in the purpose of their work.

**Goals and Personal Development.** In addition to introducing these attributes of leaders, the intensive program included a personal development project. Students decided on a summer-long goal that would require them to grow one or more aspects of leadership. Using the SMART goals framework- goals that are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-based- students chose something that they could accomplish in the span of the summer leadership program, that they could break into actionable steps, and that was important to them. For example, one student wanted to improve her skills at making clothes throughout the summer. She set out a plan whereby she would start by perfecting her designs, then practice sewing the clothing, and finally sell the clothes, enlisting her friends to help her with publicity. The goal was important to her because she hopes to create a design business after she graduates from university.

In the four weeks that followed the intensive, the curriculum directed students to consider their summer goal at each step of the way, whether talking about leading themselves, others, or impacting the world. The ongoing nature of the project allowed us to connect their goals to each week's vocabulary and concepts. In the above example this could involve developing accountability as she sets aside time to work on her sewing instead of socializing or being collaborative as she enlists the help of friends to market her products. These threads of goal-setting, leader attributes, communication, and teamwork continued through each of the weeks to ensure students were demonstrating leadership, growing leader qualities and practicing in real-time to ensure that leadership was not something they learned, but something they would live.



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# LOOKING FORWARD

At this time, the first of IPEPH's students who have graduated from college are entering the workforce and well on their way to being "leaders" in Haiti instead of "future leaders." But leadership development is an ongoing process and the future can take on many different forms. Vanderbilt's summer leadership development program was designed with the future in mind. It is intended to be the first portion of a year to two-year long leadership program. This in-school program would include:

## **1. Summer Intensive I:**

Ideally, Vanderbilt faculty and graduate students will facilitate this 2-day intensive as Douglas and Gossels did this year. The next intensive would be revised based on lessons learned and feedback from the teacher surveys.

## **2. Summer Leadership Development 4-Week**

**Program I:** The leadership course embedded in the summer English program would be a second iteration of the one taught in 2019, updated to include lessons learned.

## **3. Team-Based School Leadership Project**

**Semester/Year 1:** Students would work in teams to complete a leadership project for the school. Each team would identify a way they could improve their school, come up with a plan to do so, then lead the improvement project, gaining buy-in and recruiting help from other members of the school community. Students could tackle a beautification project, start a new club, or host an event—whatever they identified as fulfilling a need of their school community. They would gain experience in creating



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a budget, working within a team, developing a project plan, and communicating with each other and their community.

#### **4. Summer Leadership Development**

**Program II:** This leadership course would once again take place as part of the English program. This program would be for students who had already completed the first summer and year of the program, and would touch on more nuanced and high-level leadership concepts. These topics could include: the difference between managing and leading; leadership styles and when to choose them; leading for an international business environment.

#### **5. Team-Based Community Leadership**

**Project Semester/Year 2:** Students would replicate the steps they took for the school project, but identify and solve a problem or need in their community outside of their school. Students would work with each other as well as with community members to complete a project that contributed to their community in a meaningful way.

## **LESSONS LEARNED**

Haiti is more than the country we hear about on the news and it is difficult to get a real sense of what life is like on the island from a distance. The Vanderbilt team was fortunate to have Douglas's international experience from other projects in Hong Kong, Cambodia, Bosnia, and Kenya, and to have the guidance of Fox, who has lived in Haiti. However, the leadership program had limitations because it did not have enough input from Haitian leaders and learners. Facilitators could not give the richness of examples or engage in the kind of nuanced storytelling they are capable of providing to an American high school audience. As they continue to iterate the program they will seek input from local leaders to offset this limitation.





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## FINAL THOUGHTS

Leaders lead within a system. The design of that system determines the path forward for those leaders and in Haiti it is a complex and difficult one. There remain intense hurdles—unchecked government corruption, weak infrastructure, political turbulence, lagging healthcare, and a suffering economy. Leaders, however, arise in the most uncertain of circumstances and work to change systems rather than be constrained by them. By the students' own definition (A leader is a person who has the attitude and capacity to influence others, give help and advice, solve problems, and act with respectful authority) the students at IPEPH are well prepared to be the future leaders of their country. The week before the senior (Philo) class graduated, Cigarran stopped by their classroom to congratulate them and hear speeches from some of the students. One young woman stood up and spoke about her gratitude for the opportunities her class had had at IPEPH and she spoke of their excitement about their futures. The final thought she shared was that she was certain that it would be her generation to bring about systemic change in Haiti. That is a high expectation. The effort of these students provides real hope for Haiti's future.

And that is why these young people are not “just” Haiti’s future leaders; they are **Haiti’s leaders** now.



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## A NOTE FROM THE AUTHORS IN 2020

The world looked a lot different when we wrote this overview of our experience in Haiti after the summer of 2019. Due to COVID-19, we were unable to return to implement the second phase of the Leadership Development program in summer 2020. But the work in Haiti continues. Students have returned to school, though classrooms look different now. The English language program is being taught remotely with dedicated volunteer teachers. As always, the IPEPH students are displaying their resilience, dedication, and adaptability. To learn more or to find ways to support the school, please follow @nchaitimission on Instagram and Facebook.

