

# Community-Engaged Programming: Applying Lessons Learned from the VLM Green Teens Program

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## Introduction:

For the past four years, I cultivated a strong service relationship with the Virginia Living Museum and used my skills to create a four-year environmental leadership program known as Green Teens, which serves as a space for teens to engage in environmental conversations and creatively solve environmental problems in their community. The students use project-based learning to gain skills in problem-solving, innovation, and group dynamics. Community engagement guides their lessons, teaching them to identify community needs and combine them with their skills to create long-lasting change. I compiled an auto-ethnography that utilizes the DEAL reflection model (Ash & Clayton 2009) to explore the impacts of youth leaders in the Newport News community and consider the lessons the community can learn from a powerful group of teenage environmentalists. By engaging with this critical reflection model, I assessed my growth alongside the success of the Green Teens program and connected the student-led projects and deliverables to the lessons learned during program meetings.

## Community Partnership:

This reflective manuscript was created in partnership with the Virginia Living Museum Green Teens program. I established the program in September 2020 as a capacity building project and have grown it to be grant funded and self-sustaining in three years. As a developing environmental leadership program focused on community-engaged service projects, the program has taken great leaps in the progression of modern education and is ready to be used as a model for other programs like it. The program specializes in the development of young leaders and will use this reflective manuscript as evidence of the success of its developmental model.

## The DEAL Model for Critical Reflection

The DEAL Model was developed by Ash and Clayton to guide the reflective process in service-learning. It specifically helps connect theory to practice as well as identify challenges and the lessons learned from the analyzed process (Smith, Randle, and Bowers, 2022).

There are three steps to the DEAL model:

- (1) Describe
- (2) Examine
- (3) Articulate Learning

In the Describe section, the event, in this case the event is the Green Teens program, is described in quality details to provide the reader with context. In the Examine section, the successes and challenges of the experience are examined. In the Articulate Learning section, the model requires the writer to determine what they learned, how they learned it, and how others can use the lessons learned in external contexts (Smith, Randle, and Bowers, 2022).

Use of the DEAL Model for Critical Reflection was vital for extrapolating the lessons learned from the Green Teens program. Three years of education and development are difficult to sum up to those hoping to emulate the same mission; through the use of this model, I was able to create a manuscript detailing the most crucial information from the VLM Green Teens program.

## Project Goals:

The goals of this project are to evaluate the effectiveness of the Green Teens program as a model for community-engaged programming. This manuscript utilizes the DEAL critical reflective model to identify the successes and challenges of this program and to extrapolate the lessons that should be used by the reader in future programming projects. By reading this manuscript, the audience should feel confidence in the potential of youth leaders and should have learned from the challenges this program experienced.



## Results:

**Describe:** Created in 2020, The Green Teens program is a four-year developmental program specializing in leadership in the environmental field. Curriculum and program development was co-led by students and in only a few years the program showed that a student-led model can be successfully implemented if community engaged education predates their leadership opportunities.

**Examine:** The program hosted two successfully student-led service projects in its first year-highlighted in the manuscript as case studies of leadership-and grew to incorporate more broad leadership and professional development under grant-funding obtained in its second year. The program also faced challenges in leadership stability due to the nonprofit's reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic and witnessed shifts in retention and attendance by the students. By addressing these challenges, the program is preparing to continue on into its fourth year.

**Articulated Learning:** From the Green Teens program, the reader learned that student-led projects are an effective way to teach community engagement. The program can be used as a model for other student-involved programming in the education system, inside and outside of the traditional classroom.

## Project Significance:

The American education system is facing challenges that demand a shift in practice. When competing against technology and information on demand, education relies on creative practices to survive. Many educators have already begun to flip their classrooms, encouraging self-guided lessons and exploration of topics. Project-based learning is an exciting new wave of curriculum, and implementing this protocol into programming outside of the formal classroom is a way to encourage students to creatively engage in all settings.

Implementation of programming like the Green Teens program will further the mission of fostering engaged education that most educators are striving for. By putting discovery, responsibility, and impact in the hands of the students, educators can focus on safely guiding their students toward success.

## Future Steps:

The future of the Green Teens program has been handed off to the wonderful education staff at the Virginia Living Museum. Exciting new programming and opportunities are underway for my students, and they have already applied for another year of grant funding that will require a different set of skills for my students to practice. Their success will only grow as they continue to develop their personal projects and make big impacts in our local community.

In order to continue this work outside of the Green Teens program, the responsibility must shift to the educators. By adapting this programming to fit the needs of the classroom, after-school program, or community project, the mission of both the Green Teens program and this manuscript will continue on. I will personally be contributing to this work by becoming a science educator with a curriculum that pushes the boundaries of project-based and community-engaged learning.

This mission does not stop with the Green Teens program and relies on members of our community to spread its message and carry it onward.

## References:

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