

Gandhi-King Conference on Peacemaking, 2007

“Building the Beloved Community”

Student-Centered Teaching and Training for Justice and Peace: *Best Practices of INVST Community Studies at the University of Colorado-Boulder*

Colleges and universities frequently teach young people to serve the militaristic and corporate needs of the nation, as defined by Wall Street and the Department of Homeland Security. But they can also develop critical thinkers who will envision alternative realities and build positive futures. What students learn in school, they will perpetuate after graduation.

In INVST Community Studies, a leadership training program at the University of Colorado-Boulder that has been developing change agents since 1990, we attempt to offer young people the chance to BUILD THE WORLD THEY WANT TO LIVE IN, while in college. Our program combines academics with activism. Through theory, skills and service, this innovative training corps prepares young people to succeed as community leaders who work for justice, peace and environmental sustainability. The program strives to be practice-oriented and student-centered. The model could be considered a non-military alternative to the ROTC, preparing tomorrow's leaders and equipping them to choose careers in which they will be able to offer positive solutions to local and global problems, both social and environmental. We take a radical stance for peace by providing a viable alternative to young people who know they want their lives to MEAN something, but aren't sure which path to take: through a two-year comprehensive training experience that combines rigorous academics with a long menu of practical skills and travel and exposure to various social ills, young people realize that there are many ways to make a living while making a difference and being part of the solutions, not the problems.

INVST's best practices include:

- **Placing students at the center of our administrative practices:** our students serve on committees so that they can learn about administration in a non-profit by experiencing it first-hand. They choose our staff by interviewing potential summer program facilitators, instructors and faculty directors, for example, and they experience organizational governance by shaping and voting on policy for our program in monthly meetings with the directors and faculty. They help reform the curriculum, since they get the chance to say “yay” or “nay” to the contents of the very classes they will take. We believe this is an uncommon offering in a university

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setting, and we also see it as fundamental to development of critical consciousness.

- **Using a Freirean pedagogical approach in all aspects of what we do:** we invite young people to co-create the teaching and learning opportunities, and we strive to choose subject matter that is relevant to their lives, their communities and the social and environmental problems they have directly witnessed. We use peace educating strategies for the 21st Century, leaving off of lecturing whenever possible and encouraging students to get their hands dirty in field work, internships and community service projects they construct from the group-up. (Our approach is based on the work of Brazilian activist/educator Paulo Freire.)
- **Supporting INVST graduates long after they leave our 2-year program:** our more than 170 alumni, scattered all over the Earth and engaging in meaningful work in service to the planet and her people, testify to the power and relevance of our training program. They support us and we support them to stay in the struggle, for a lifetime.

INVST Community Studies challenges the domination of our schools by the market and the military, and offers a viable alternative. Slowly but surely, one cohort at a time, we are working to BUILD the beloved community we dream of by teaching and training for social justice and environmental sustainability.

For more information, please call us at (303) 492-8045 or send an e-mail to the Program Director at sabrinasideris@gmail.com. Thanks!