

Reflecting on Aztec CORE
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Author Note

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I was originally prompted to attend Aztec CORE as a facilitator when I first started my assistantship in Student Life and Leadership at San Diego State University (SDSU). The experience was framed as a leadership retreat for emerging leaders in the mountains. I was pleasantly surprised to find out that leadership opportunities like this existed for students, since they didn't exist at my undergraduate institution. I was even more excited to experience a weekend-away retreat, since part of my responsibilities as the Fraternity & Sorority Life Graduate Assistant included planning a somewhat similar retreat in January. The day before leaving for CORE, however, I had some doubts as to whether I would be ready to facilitate the retreat. I was concerned with my technical level of preparation as a professional, as well as my physical and mental state, as I had just returned from NASPA's Western Regional Conference some twenty-four hours before. Nevertheless, I packed my bags, reviewed the facilitator notes, and got ready to embark on a journey that I'd come to find to impact me for the following week.

The entire experience was really humbling; leading and facilitating a small group was an amazing experience. Of the multiple groups that were pre-assigned as designated "pod groups", I facilitated a pod with a fellow undergraduate who had been a part of the retreat three times prior. I had been given the instruction to use him as an assistant, rather than letting him directly facilitate. I had soon come to find that this individual was eager to step in, and was more than capable of leading a group himself. I decided it was important to act on instructions by allowing him to assist through partial facilitation so that he could have opportunities to grow as a leader. An interesting dynamic was created when I found that many of the facilitator notes were vague in design, and I had to conduct a group conversation even though it was my first time going through the experience myself. Having a returning-undergraduate, however, allowed me to become comfortable with the uncertainty and ambiguity, knowing that I had a support system

and some level of a resource next to me. With the help of this undergraduate, I found that it was possible to ground myself in ambiguity with certain experiences that I already had, such as advising leadership development on a one-on-one basis (Personal Goal 4).

One of the particularly powerful experiences for me and the students was the Crossing the Line activity, one of the few activities where the facilitators were asked to participate. This activity was traditionally one of my favorite diversity trainings, since it allowed for students with similar backgrounds to connect and it had a high impact with relatively low risk. This was, however, one of the only times where I was the only person who stepped in for a certain question. The activity made me feel very uncomfortable in a negative manner, and I wasn't sure how to process it in the moment. I was surprised to receive such a strong emotion from a familiar event; one that I thought I'd become comfortable with. I was allowed little to no time to process, however, since the facilitators needed to facilitate pod discussions with our groups. I was able to successfully make this transition by identifying the emotion as a trigger due to vulnerability. I was uncomfortable because I was vulnerable. I was scared of how people would perceive me, scared that my pod group would think less of me. I realized that, in the moment, I could not put words and perceptions in other peoples' mouths; so my next step was to continue facilitating, to lead. This processing allowed me to realize that I was successfully navigating a trigger process, and I was grateful for the opportunity to do so (Personal Goal 2).

In my conversations with my small group, I was allowed the opportunity to debrief with my students for an entire hour, with only one instruction: being my true self. Instead of directly telling them how the activity related to diversity and to one's values, I decided to ask questions and probe instead (PLO 2). After getting everyone on a similar emotional state by having a discussion about how they felt during the activity and mentioning that it was OK to feel vulnerable, as I had, I asked questions about why the activity was conducted. With a general set

of concepts listed, I continued to ask questions about how they defined leadership. Every student, as I had expected, provided me with answers on what they thought a good leader should do, but none addressed leadership itself. Themes in the responses they provided included being able to connect with other people, helping other people, or making change with a group of people. I addressed that their responses were about a good leader, not leadership, and prompted them to reflect on that fact. A moment later, I continued to ask about why it was important for someone to know themselves before they could help others, connect with others, or work with others. I ended with a discussion on how the activity applied to leadership. In this process, I found it was important to meet these students where they were (PLO 3). Particularly, this population of college freshman did not know much about leadership or diversity yet, and it was important to guide them throughout this process (PLO 10).

Throughout the weekend, it was powerful to see the impact I could have on students in the short span of three days and two nights. During the conversation that followed with my pod, I found that I was right to have not assumed what their perception of me was after the Crossing the Line activity. I found that it was instead important to find myself and use that as a mechanism for finding some level of connection with the students. This was demonstrated when students from other pod groups who I had little interaction with wrote me notes, noting that they appreciated my courage in being truthful of my values. The weekend allowed me to find myself in my practice (Professional Goal 2), as well as develop a better sense of what it means to be a good Student Affairs professional (Professional Goal 4). I believe that, through Aztec Core, my awareness of self has increased on a personal and professional level.