



Leadership in Action Project Report

Personal Finance and Small Business Development Course in Spanish

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Introduction

My Leadership-in-Action (LiA) Project at the Binational Institute of Human Development (BIHD) was a seven-week experience that challenged me to reconsider what effective leadership looks like in practice. I entered the placement with a detailed project proposal, specific objectives, and a clear idea of the contribution I hoped to make. However, one of the most significant outcomes of the experience was learning that leadership does not simply mean executing a predetermined plan. It also requires the ability to listen, reassess assumptions, and adapt when new information reveals a more meaningful opportunity for impact.

My original Leadership-in-Action Project was titled Path to Citizenship: Developing a Bilingual Citizenship Test Preparation Programme at BIHD. The project was designed to address barriers faced by immigrant clients pursuing naturalization, particularly Spanish-speaking adults who may experience challenges related to English proficiency, limited formal education, access to affordable preparation materials, and test anxiety. My goal was to create a reusable bilingual English/Spanish citizenship preparation programme that could continue serving BIHD clients after my placement ended.

As I became more familiar with BIHD, however, my understanding of the organization's work and the needs of the community expanded. Through conversations with BIHD staff, observations of the organization's work, and research into the barriers facing immigrant communities, I identified an opportunity to contribute in another area: financial literacy and small-business development.

The project ultimately evolved into the development of a financial literacy and business development initiative intended to support immigrant families and entrepreneurs. Alongside this initiative, I developed an issue brief examining barriers affecting immigrant communities, a

Small Business Support Framework, and a Partnership Map identifying potential organizations that could support BIHD's work.

While this shift meant that I did not complete the citizenship preparation programme outlined in my initial proposal, the underlying purpose of my Leadership-in-Action Project remained consistent. Both projects were rooted in identifying barriers to access, creating accessible educational resources, and developing sustainable contributions that could continue supporting immigrant communities beyond my individual involvement.

This report reflects on the outcomes of my Leadership-in-Action Project in relation to my original goals and objectives, the tangible work I completed, and the leadership lessons I gained throughout the placement.

Initial Goals and Objectives

My original project was based on the belief that access to citizenship is not simply a legal question but also an access and education problem. BIHD's Immigration and Legal Center assists clients with immigration processes, including naturalization applications. However, completing an application is only one part of becoming a naturalized citizen. Applicants must also successfully complete the naturalization interview, including English-language components and questions about United States history and government.

My proposed programme was designed to provide bilingual preparation materials that would make this process more accessible to adult immigrant learners. The overarching goal was to design, pilot, and deliver a sustainable citizenship test preparation programme that included civics instruction, English reading and writing practice, interview preparation, and reusable materials.

I established four primary objectives. First, I planned to conduct a community needs assessment with at least ten BIHD clients pursuing or considering naturalization. Second, I planned to develop a bilingual civics curriculum covering all 100 USCIS naturalization questions. Third, I planned to create a bilingual English-language preparation module covering the reading, writing, and speaking components of the naturalization interview. Finally, I planned to deliver a complete toolkit to BIHD, including participant materials, a facilitator guide, flashcards, quizzes, and recommendations for programme sustainability.

These objectives reflected several leadership principles that were important to me at the beginning of the placement. I wanted to ground my work in community needs rather than assumptions, communicate complex information in accessible ways, take initiative in addressing gaps in existing services, and create something sustainable rather than a one-time intervention.

Although the specific project changed, these principles continued to guide my work throughout the internship.

Adapting the Project to the Organizational Context

One of the most important outcomes of my Leadership-in-Action experience was recognizing the need to adapt my project based on what I learned during the placement.

As I became more familiar with BIHD, I gained a broader understanding of the organization's role within immigrant communities. BIHD provides immigration and legal services, but its work is also connected to broader questions of economic, social, and family stability. The organization serves immigrant communities facing a variety of challenges that extend beyond individual immigration cases.

Through my work and conversations with the BIHD team, I began to recognize that many of the barriers faced by immigrant clients were interconnected. Immigration status can affect an individual's access to healthcare, education, stable employment, housing, and financial resources. Fear of deportation can also discourage individuals from accessing services or reporting exploitation.

I also realized that my previous experience working in financial literacy could potentially be applied to a need that aligned with BIHD's broader mission of empowering immigrant communities. This led me to reconsider the original scope of my project.

Changing direction required me to acknowledge that my initial proposal did not represent a complete understanding of BIHD's needs. While I had conducted research before beginning the placement, the experience of working within the organization provided insights that could not have been fully understood from outside.

This was an important lesson in leadership. I learned that a strong plan should provide direction, but it should not prevent a leader from responding to new information. Continuing with the original project simply because it had been proposed would have been easier than

changing direction. However, I ultimately believed that adapting my work would allow me to make a more relevant contribution.

The decision to pivot therefore reflected one of the central principles of my original proposal: designing a project around real community and organizational needs rather than assumptions.

Understanding Barriers Facing Immigrant Communities

A major outcome of my placement was developing a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by immigrant communities in the United States.

As part of my work, I developed an issue brief examining five significant barriers: healthcare access, education, workplace rights, housing instability, and linguistic and cultural barriers.

Limited healthcare access can prevent undocumented immigrants from receiving affordable and consistent care. Many individuals face challenges accessing public insurance programmes and may experience significant costs even when healthcare services are available.

Educational barriers can limit long-term economic mobility. Although students can access K–12 education regardless of immigration status, undocumented students often face significant challenges when pursuing higher education, including limited access to financial aid and scholarships.

Workplace exploitation also emerged as an important issue. Immigrant workers are entitled to workplace protections, but fear related to immigration status can discourage individuals from reporting wage theft, unsafe conditions, or discrimination.

Housing instability can similarly be compounded by immigration status and language barriers. Families may face exploitative landlords, unsafe housing conditions, high rent burdens, and difficulty understanding leases or tenant rights.

Finally, linguistic and cultural barriers can prevent individuals from accessing resources even when those resources technically exist. Many services are primarily designed for English speakers, and even Spanish-language resources may not meet the needs of individuals who speak other languages.

Researching these barriers changed my understanding of immigration work. Before my placement, I was primarily interested in immigration law and policy. At BIHD, I began to understand more clearly that legal challenges are often connected to broader social and economic conditions.

This realization directly influenced the evolution of my Leadership-in-Action Project and encouraged me to explore how BIHD could support clients through economic empowerment in addition to legal services.

Financial Literacy and Small-Business Development Initiative

The most significant tangible outcome of my Leadership-in-Action Project was the development of a financial literacy and small-business development initiative.

The initiative was divided into two phases. The first focused on building a personal finance foundation, while the second addressed business development and entrepreneurship.

The personal finance component included banking basics, budgeting and saving, debt management, predatory lending, and credit building. These topics were selected because financial knowledge can support both daily financial stability and longer-term entrepreneurial goals.

The second component focused on the challenges involved in starting and maintaining a business. This included business ideation, financial planning, access to capital, registration, licensing, permits, and other practical considerations.

The initiative was particularly focused on barriers affecting immigrant and undocumented entrepreneurs. Many individuals may face challenges developing credit histories or accessing traditional forms of financing. Limited financial literacy can also make it difficult to navigate business decisions and administrative requirements. Language barriers can further restrict access to technical resources, and fear of interacting with financial institutions or government agencies may discourage individuals from seeking support.

The programme was therefore designed to provide a foundation that could help individuals build financial confidence before navigating more complex business decisions.

I am particularly proud that the project emphasized sustainability. Although I was unable to implement and evaluate a fully developed programme during the limited timeframe of the

internship, I created a framework and collection of resources that BIHD could continue developing.

This outcome reflected the long-term thinking that had also been central to my original citizenship preparation proposal. In both cases, my goal was to leave behind resources that could remain useful after my placement ended.

Growth in Immigration Law and Policy

My placement also significantly expanded my understanding of immigration law and policy. I learned more about immigration processes involving DACA, adjustment of status, asylum, and other legal issues affecting BIHD clients. These experiences helped me understand how policy changes can affect individual lives and immigration cases.

One of the most meaningful aspects of the placement was the opportunity to attend immigration court hearings. Having never previously entered a courtroom, this experience gave me direct exposure to an environment I hope to work in during my future legal career. The experience strengthened my interest in law school and public interest law. It also reinforced the importance of legal representation and access to understandable information.

At the same time, I learned the importance of humility. Observing court proceedings did not mean that I immediately understood every legal argument or procedural decision. Instead, I had to become comfortable learning from others and recognizing the limits of my knowledge.

This was an important aspect of my leadership development. I learned that entering unfamiliar environments requires curiosity and humility. Rather than pretending to understand more than I did, I learned to listen, observe, and ask questions.

Leadership Development and Lessons Learned

Several Changemaker Values were particularly visible throughout my Leadership-in-Action Project. Curiosity guided my willingness to explore issues beyond the original scope of my project. I entered BIHD with a focus on citizenship preparation but remained open to learning about immigration policy, nonprofit operations, economic empowerment, and financial literacy. Ambition motivated me to create a sustainable contribution rather than simply completing assigned tasks. However, I also experienced tension between ambition and focus. The more I learned about the challenges facing immigrant communities, the more issues I wanted to address. I learned that effective leadership requires prioritization. Bravery was required when I decided to adapt my project. Changing direction meant leaving behind a detailed plan and accepting uncertainty. It also meant entering unfamiliar professional environments and acknowledging when I still had more to learn. Determination was necessary throughout the internship as I worked to develop multiple reports and frameworks within a relatively short period.

I also experienced tension between being fast and being thoughtful. The internship involved multiple deadlines, requiring me to work efficiently. However, I learned that working quickly should not mean rushing without reflection. Effective leadership requires understanding which decisions require careful consideration and which can be made efficiently.

Finally, the value of good remained central to my work. I wanted my contribution to be genuinely useful to BIHD and the communities it serves. This required me to think beyond completing an academic assignment and consider whether my recommendations were realistic and sustainable.

If I were to approach this experience again, I would establish clearer checkpoints for reassessing the project's direction, communicate developing ideas earlier, and narrow the scope of my work more quickly. I would also build more opportunities for direct feedback and evaluation into the project timeline.

Conclusion

My Leadership-in-Action Project at BIHD taught me that leadership is not measured solely by whether an individual completes the exact plan they originally proposed. Leadership also requires the ability to listen and adapt when experience provides a better understanding of what is needed.

I began the placement with the goal of developing a bilingual citizenship preparation programme. Through my experiences at BIHD, I ultimately developed a broader understanding of the interconnected barriers facing immigrant communities and shifted my focus toward financial literacy, entrepreneurship, and economic empowerment.

The tangible outcomes of my work included an issue brief examining barriers affecting immigrant communities, a financial literacy and business development programme framework, a Small Business Support Framework, and a Partnership Map identifying potential collaborators and resources.

Personally, the experience strengthened my interest in immigration law, public interest law, and public policy. It also gave me greater clarity about the type of leader I hope to become. I want to be a leader who is ambitious enough to develop new ideas but humble enough to change them when necessary. I want to remain curious when entering unfamiliar spaces and brave enough to acknowledge what I do not yet know. Most importantly, I want to create work that continues beyond my own involvement by building relationships, connecting resources, and developing sustainable structures.

My Leadership-in-Action experience was ultimately an important lesson in adaptability. The project I completed was different from the project I originally imagined, but the experience reinforced the purpose that motivated me to pursue the placement in the first place: using my

skills and education to help reduce barriers and expand opportunities for immigrant communities.