

A Comparative Leadership Development Study within Student Collegiate Clubs and Organizations at an Agrarian University in Ukraine and a University within the United States

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Abstract

This study was conducted to explore leadership development within student collegiate clubs and organizations at an agrarian university in Ukraine. The data were then compared to a College of Agricultural Sciences at a university within the United States. The information collected in the study will serve as a basis for understanding leadership development within student collegiate clubs and organizations. The findings indicated that leadership development within student collegiate clubs and organizations is occurring. The study found that leadership development is a product of the culture in which it functions. Students from the Ukrainian university are developing leadership skills through a highly socialized model. This results in the development of a collaborative leadership style, which reflects the philosophy of the former Soviet culture. In sharp contrast to the collaborative style, the United States group is developing more of an individualistic style, indicative of its culture.

Introduction

Leadership is a complex process by which an individual influences others to accomplish a mission, task or objective (Nahavandi, 2003). Nahavandi goes on to discuss leadership development as the creation of leadership abilities and characteristics through formal and non-formal methods. Furthermore leadership development is a life-long process that occurs at multiple levels, from individuals to organizations. Future leaders are made, not born and one strategy, which develops these leaders, occurs within student-based clubs and organizations. Larson (2000)

and Silbereisen, Eyferth, and Rudinger (1986) discussed that youth activities available through youth organizations provide a medium for students to become producers of their own development. Personal leadership skill development can begin and be enhanced when students participate in clubs, organizations, and team settings. Litowitz (1995) stated that “student organizations provide the opportunity for leaders to surface and evolve” (p.24). Youth who participate in clubs and organizations learn leadership skills such as: teamwork, reasoning, problem solving, decision-making, communication, responsibility, and self-esteem (Sawi & Smith, 1997; Litowitz, 1995). Student-based collegiate clubs and organizations also provide an important outlet for the development of leadership skills. Leadership skills are developed within the context of club meetings and activities either formal or non-formal, and real world experiences. These experiences are enhancing traits like responsibility and the ability to communicate, which are important as students move out of academia and into a career. According to Mackes (2005) since 1999, at the National Association for Colleges and Employers (NACE) communication skills both verbal and written have ranked number one as qualities coveted by employers. Furthermore, Mackes states “employers look to hire new college graduates who have relevant work experience, gained through an internship or cooperative education experience, but even unrelated work experience can help” (NACE, 2005, ¶ 8). In addition to the above-mentioned leadership skills, connections with industry professionals made through collegiate student organizations are extremely valuable to students (Dworkin, Larson, & Hanson, 2003).

The mission of the Agrarian University in the Ukraine “is to provide its students with a high level of education, while developing conscientious well-rounded people who possess the leadership skills needed to become active builders of an independent Ukrainian state” (Agrarian University, Brochure, ND, p. 5). Student-based collegiate clubs and organizations enhance the academic component of a post-secondary education by developing leadership skills through experiential learning. Increasingly universities are recognizing the value of student organizations. For example, the University of Illinois notes that “in these organizations, students assume the major responsibility for planning and directing the activities” (University of Illinois, 2004, ¶ 1).

The landscape of leadership in business today is changing in the United States. Ikenberry (1996) stated that “if there is one consistent complaint in politics around the world today, it is about the absence of ‘Leadership’ at local, national and global levels” (p. 387). The next generations of leaders currently are developing leadership skills through opportunities such as internships, formal coursework, and membership in student based clubs and organizations. The opportunities and factors that drive many formal and non-formal leadership programs are products of the culture in which people live and work. Kirkpatrick and Locke (1991) shared this ideal in Nahavandi (2003); however, they suggested that there are some key traits associated with an effective leader. These include “drive, which includes motivation and energy; desire and motivation to lead; honesty and integrity; self-confidence; intelligence; and knowledge of the business” (p. 39). However, while not everyone

may become an effective leader there are still leadership traits that are important in today's business environment. According to the Washington State Department of Personnel, while every job requires a unique set of skills, employers rank communication, leadership, confidence, problem solving, flexibility, and energy as important (Washington State, 2004, ¶ 1).

Elenkov (1998) noted that a country's leadership style(s) is influenced by its political orientation. For example, Elenkov compared the United States and Russia. Managers in the United States worked with a fact-based, fast decision making style, while Russian managers used an intuitive style with political power or standing to make decisions. The difference in the styles was directly due to the leadership cultures present in each country. This is supported by Hofstede's (1980a) cultural dimensions of power distance. Another factor often associated with leadership development within other countries is the concept of individualism versus collectivism. Royer and Van der Velden (2002) detailed Hofstede's third cultural dimension, individualism versus collectivism, as the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. Groups are defined as members of families, organizations, or other non-formal groups. Individuals in a society that reflects collectivism work for the betterment of the group or organization. People work as a team to accomplish goals and do not look for individual success because they do not consider themselves successful unless the group succeeds. The opposite of this spectrum is individualism, whereby identity is based on the individual and tasks take precedence over relationships (Hofstede, 1980a). Understanding the cultural differences between individuals and especially leaders is crucial for effective communication and mutual respect (Hofstede, 1980b).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to determine the leadership development practices of collegiate student clubs and organizations at an Agrarian University in Ukraine and compare that to a similar student population in a College of Agricultural Sciences (CAS) in the United States. The following objectives guided the study: (a) assess organizational and leadership characteristics of collegiate student organizations at an agrarian university, (b) identify leadership positions, activities and professional development opportunities for students in collegiate student organizations at an agrarian university, and (c) compare leadership based activities and professional development opportunities between collegiate student organizations at an agrarian university and a college of agricultural sciences in the United States.

Methods

The population for the study consisted of undergraduate college students who were holding or had held an officer position in a collegiate student club and faculty who advised collegiate student clubs, and administrators. Personal interviews were conducted at both universities by the researcher. The semi-structured interviews were conducted using criterion-based sampling procedures (Patton, 1990). The total sample size was 30. The sample consisted of 18 collegiate student organization officers, eight collegiate student organization advisors, and four administrators (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Transcription of the interviews was conducted at the end of the interview process, to reduce bias from previous interviews. The semi-structured interview process consisted of 14 open-ended questions which were asked in a pre-determined order to the participants. The questions were based on the leadership opportunities gained in student-based clubs and organizations. More specifically, interview questions were designed to develop a profile of activities, experiences, behavior and skills, opportunities, barriers, and positive attributes from advisors, administrators, and students related to their participation in and perceptions of collegiate organizations. Two questionnaires were used, one for students and the other for faculty and administrators.

The questionnaire was sent to the Ukrainian agrarian university prior to collection to assure compliance with university policy. A native Ukrainian conducted translation of the questions, recruitment letter, and informed consent form. Content and face validity was developed by a panel of experts at both universities who had expertise in leadership development and youth programming at the post-secondary level.

Results

Objective 1: *Leadership characteristics of student organizations and clubs at the Ukrainian agrarian university.*

Collegiate student clubs and organizations have been in existence at the Agrarian University (AU) prior to and since the country achieved independence in 1991. Currently, the university has numerous clubs (32) available to students and faculty. The majority (20) of the student-based clubs are sports related, such as, soccer, arm wrestling, and basketball clubs. The remaining clubs are focused around the following categories: performing arts, academics, culture, educational, life skills, and service, and socialization. There are two organizations associated with student governance at the university. They are OSNOVA and the Trade Union. As stated by a student, the mission of OSNOVA “is to make the student’s life more interesting,” while developing leadership skills for future employment. Participants were asked to name three or four leadership characteristics or traits they developed or acquired as the result of participation in their clubs or organizations. Students, faculty, and administrators all responded that written and oral communication was the most

significant leadership skill gained through participation in a student club. Additional responses included responsibility, desire, establishing relationships, and honesty. Table 1 represents the top five characteristics developed by order of importance as stated by the two groups.

Table 1: Top five leadership characteristics from AU students, faculty, administrators

<u>Students</u>	<u>Faculty/administrators</u>
1. Communication	1. Communication
2. Responsibility	2. Desire
3. Organizational skills	3. Self-organization
4. Establishing relationships	4. Expertise
5. Acquired knowledge	5. Honesty

Note: Rank order of university groups at AU.

The rank order of responses possibly helps to explain the fundamental leadership development changes that occur from collegiate student to business-type settings. Ukrainian students indicated that responsibility was the second most important characteristic. The researcher attributes this to age and previous experience. Ukrainian youth and students rarely work because it is difficult to find a job and because culture typically dictates that their parents take care of them through their college years. Therefore, participating in a collegiate club or organization offers them a real opportunity to develop leadership skills like the ones mentioned in Table 1.

However, the responses given by the faculty and administrators at AU indicate that leadership skills may not be recognizable during the initial stage of leadership development. Characteristics like desire, self-organization, responsibility, and honesty are all traits that require intellectual and emotional maturation before they are understood as important. The students did recognize the need for organizational skills, however, these were all individuals in leadership positions and the organizational skills mentioned had to deal with the followers in the clubs, not the leaders themselves. In addition, AU students described “establishing relationships” as a key trait learned. A student reflected their belief regarding the importance of establishing relationships, saying “make contact with others (establish relationships), good influence to others, and listen to the thoughts of others.” Developing relationships serves an important role in leading and working with peers.

Objective 2: *Leadership positions, activities and professional development opportunities for students at the agrarian university.*

Leadership Positions

Leadership opportunities at the agrarian university are present at many levels. Organizational leaders of OSNOVA and the Trade Union are called “Chiefs” and “Vice Chiefs.” Organizational chiefs are elected officers, who choose their vice chiefs. The chief of OSNOVA can serve a maximum of a two terms, with reelection every year. All leaders in OSNOVA are students. The chief of the Trade Union can serve an undetermined number of terms; however, the Chief of the Trade Union can be a faculty member, if that individual is under the age of 28, because the trade union is considered a “Youth Organization.” Academic groups also present a forum for student leaders. Each academic group has a student leader called the “Head” of the group. Student-based clubs also designate their leaders as “Heads” and “Vice Heads” of Clubs. The Head and the Vice Head are elected to their positions by the membership of the club, by a majority vote. Figure 1 represents the executive leadership opportunities available for students and faculty at the agrarian university.

Leadership Training Programs. The agrarian university is currently without formal leadership development programs or courses. However, there are opportunities for non-formal leadership development within clubs and organizations through experiential and academic learning activities.

Activities and Professional Development. Activities and competitions operate as forums for professional and leadership development. The main organization, OSNOVA, organizes parties and trips, which allow students to relax and build relationships, both social and professional. Scientific conferences provide a backdrop for students to learn leadership skills such as communication, and responsibility while increasing their technical knowledge. Competitions exist within the majority of the clubs and organizations. These competitions develop leadership skills like team building, communication and commitment, and provide a backdrop for professional development.

Figure 1: Executive collegiate student leadership opportunities at Agrarian University

Two Organizations

OSNOVA translates into foundation of the organization, responsible for representing the student body, works between the students and the administration, person elected once and year and can serve two terms.

Leadership roles: Chief and Vice Chief (held by students only)

**Chief of Five Departmental Clubs
Four Vice Chiefs (duties)**

1. First Deputy
2. Sports/Culture
3. Science/Education
4. Dorms

Trade Union

Chief of the organization defends the rights of the students and faculty.

Chief of organization is a professor at the university, elected by conference members once a year; conference members represent three people from each academic group. Each academic group has a trade union representative.

Leadership roles: Chief and Vice Chief (held by either students or faculty)

**Student Deans of Five Departments
Each Department has Four Vice Deans (duties)**

1. First Deputy
2. Sports/Culture
3. Science/Education
4. Dorms

Clubs and Academic Groups

Heads of Clubs

One per club – There are currently 32 clubs at the university

Heads of Academic Groups

One per group chosen by the Administration – There are approximately 130 academic groups

Objective 3: *Comparing leadership development methods and styles between student collegiate clubs and organizations at an agrarian university and a college of agricultural sciences in the United States.*

Leadership development methods and styles within student collegiate clubs and organizations within the College of Agricultural Sciences group are more highly developed when compared to those of the Ukrainian group. Multiple criteria were used in comparing the leadership development methods and styles. They include: the offices and duties of student leaders, activities, leadership training, and leadership skills taught or learned through participation.

The student officer structure within the CAS group is well defined. The majority of clubs and organizations represented in the study contain four main leadership positions: president, vice president, secretary and treasurer. Table 2 represents the positions and responsibilities of CAS officers.

Table 2: Main leadership positions with student clubs and organizations in the CAS Group

<u>Leaders</u>	<u>Duties</u>
President	Run the meetings, leader of the club, idea stimulator
Vice President	Provide leadership, act in the absence of the President
Secretary	Correspondence: takes minutes, sends emails
Treasurer	Organization of monetary funds

Leadership development opportunities are occurring in multiple forms with the student collegiate clubs and organizations with the College of Agricultural Sciences. The student advisors and administrators recognize the value of non-formal leadership development through activities and interaction with peers and adult leaders. Opportunities for formal leadership development are available through a CAS undergraduate option and a minor in leadership development; several courses in leadership development, and professional development opportunities through the university undergraduate student association. Participants in the CAS group were asked to name the top three or four leadership skills they learned from participation in clubs and organizations. The results yielded similar responses to those from the Agrarian University group, with communication as the most important skill learned. Table 3 represents the top five responses from the CAS group ranked in order of importance.

Table 3: Top five leadership characteristics of college of agricultural sciences students, faculty, and administrators

<u>Students</u>	<u>Faculty/Administrators</u>
1. Communication	1. Communication
2. Teamwork	2. Team building
3. Organization	3. Fairness
4. Responsibility	4. Organization
5. Networking/Motivating Others	5. Risk Taking

Note: Rank order of university groups at CAS.

The students’ responses reflect the leadership skill development that is occurring in their respective clubs and organizations. Faculty and administrators’ top five skills are similar. Two skills, however, represent a more advanced level of leadership. Fairness and risk taking are more advanced levels of leadership development that is often understood through years of experience.

Conclusion, Implications, and Recommendations

The study explored the concept of leadership development within student collegiate clubs and organizations. According to the literature, youth who participate in youth

clubs and organizations learn leadership skills such as teamwork, reasoning, problem solving, decision-making, communication, responsibility, and self-esteem (Sawi & Smith, 1997; Litowitz, 1995). Comparison of the two schools revealed a clearer understanding as to the importance of culture in developing future leaders. Students from the CAS group are developing leadership skills similar to their Ukrainian contemporaries like communication and organizational skills. Differences do exist, however, between the two groups. The CAS group noted characteristics like networking and teamwork skills. These skills reflect traits future U.S. employers are looking for in their employees (Dworkin et al., 2003; Washington State, 2004, ¶ 1; NACE, 2005, ¶ 8). The AU group reinforced the development of leaders through collaborative non-formal means. These clubs and organizations focus on developing relationships, while trying to enhance the collegiate experience for their students. Developing relationships as a means of leadership development has cultural significance, as it is related to a collaborative leadership style. The collaborative style represents the fundamental difference between the two groups (Royer & Van der Velden, 2002). Table 4 clearly illustrates what makes each university unique in their approach to leadership development. The comparisons also serve as a means of understanding how culture affects how leadership is viewed.

Table 4: Key differences in leadership development models at AU and CAS

<u>AU</u>	<u>CAS</u>
1. Majority of clubs <u>are not</u> tied to major	1. Majority of clubs tied to majors
2. Highly competitive environment	2. Low competitive environment
3. Collaborative development	3. Individualistic development
4. Leadership development <u>all</u> non-forma	4. Majority leadership development not format

The findings of the study revealed that student collegiate clubs and organizations are functioning at AU and are providing opportunities for non-formal leadership development. Literature indicates that “leadership is...a performing art, collection of practices and behaviors not a position (Kouzes & Posner, 1995, p. 30). These activities and practices as well as behaviors are driving leadership development. Future studies on this topic in Ukraine would be well served in order to conduct a random study of agrarian universities looking at populations in the western and eastern sections of the country, using a comparison study. Ukraine is a fairly homogenous population. The western section of the country, however, is more traditional Ukrainian while the eastern side is heavily influenced by Russia. In addition, an investigation regarding business and industry needs be done in Ukraine and a determination of what leadership skills and behaviors are desired by Ukrainian employers. Furthermore, the study has revealed the needs to develop programs for educational and life-long development of leadership. These programs would include: (a) an international leadership forum with students from across the globe to discuss leadership practices and cultural leadership ideals, (b) develop models of leadership which illustrate a variety of leadership styles, and (c) a strengthening of student understanding regarding the importance of skills gained though participation in

formal and non-formal programs so that such understanding would focus on leadership skills versus resume development and the importance of active participation and taking responsibility, and (d) development of curricula that could be infused within courses in higher education.

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Biography

Tracy S. Hoover has a B.S. in Animal Husbandry (1982) from Delaware Valley College, a M.Agr. in Animal Industry (1983), and a Ph.D. in Agricultural and Extension Education (1990) from Pennsylvania State University. Tracy taught high school agricultural education from 1985-1988. Following completion of her doctorate in 1990 she joined the faculty at Penn State in the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education. Hoover then joined the faculty in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida in January of 1993. While in Florida she taught undergraduate and graduate level courses in leadership development, pre-service teacher education, and teaching and learning. In June 2001, Hoover returned the Department Agricultural and Extension Education at Pennsylvania State University as an associate professor with responsibilities in youth leadership development as well as pre-service and in-service teacher education. As of October 1, 2005, Hoover assumed the role of head of the Department of Agricultural and Extension Education.

Erik K. Kelling has B.S. in Dairy and Animal Science (2000) and M.S. in Agricultural Extension and Education (2004) from Pennsylvania State University. Erik was a dairy farm manager from 2000-2002. In February, 2005 Erik joined Customs and Border Protection as an Agriculture Specialist in the Port of Baltimore.