

The Undergraduate Leadership Teaching Assistant (ULTA): A High-Impact Practice for Undergraduates Studying Leadership

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Abstract

To meet the demands for effective leadership, leadership educators should integrate high-impact practices for students to develop, practice, and evaluate their leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities. The purpose of this application brief is to describe how undergraduate leadership teaching assistant (ULTA) experiences can be a high-impact practice for undergraduates studying leadership. The ULTA experience at Texas A&M University in the Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications (ALEC) department was examined using the six characteristics purported by Kuh (2008) to describe effective high-impact practices: considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks, interaction with faculty and peers on substantive matters, increased likelihood of experiencing diversity, frequent feedback on performance, application of learning to different settings, and better understanding of self in relation to others. The ULTA experience can be a high-impact practice that provides leadership students with the opportunities to apply their leadership learning to their teaching roles and reflect on their experience to gain new leadership perspectives. Recommendations for implementing this practice include: purposeful interactions with ULTAs,

feedback and assessment of experience, training, and a rigorous recruitment process.

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

Countless decades have been devoted to understanding how students learn. Colleges and universities continue to create and assess “meaningful” learning environments that produce positive outcomes for learners. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2012) articulates the necessity for higher education to invest time and resources into creating challenging liberal education learning experiences. A growing trend is the use of high-impact educational practices, which have been identified as active learning experiences that increase student retention and student engagement in higher education (Kuh, 2008). Kuh (2008) asserts six characteristics about high-impact practices which make them so effective with students. High-impact practices:

- 1) demand that students devote considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks; most require daily decisions that deepen students’ investment in the activity as well as their commitment to their academic program and the college.
- 2) put students in circumstances that essentially demand they interact with faculty and peers about substantive matters, typically over extended periods of time.
- 3) increase the likelihood that students will experience diversity through contact with people who are different than themselves.
- 4) allow students to get frequent feedback about their performance.
- 5) provide opportunities for students to see how what they are learning works in different settings.
- 6) help students gain a better understanding of self in relation to others (Kuh, 2008, pp. 14-17).

Common high-impact practices developed by colleges and universities include: first year seminars, common experiences, learning communities, writing-intensive courses, collaborative projects, undergraduate research, global learning, service-learning, internships, and capstone projects (Kuh, 2008). The purpose of these impactful experiences is to create student behaviors that lead to significant gains in learning.

Leadership educators have used a variety of high-impact practices to benefit students studying leadership. Service-learning is one type of high impact practice which has documented outcomes. Service-learning can connect leadership students to their local communities, engage youth leaders with diverse community organizations, help students explore their personal values and roles as leaders in a team environment and in the community, and examine the role of leaders in affecting community change (Hoover & Webster, 2004; Langone, 2004; Seemiller, 2006; Sessa, Matos, & Hopkins, 2009; Webster, Bruce, & Hoover, 2006).

Another valuable high-impact practice in leadership education is the study abroad model for learning. Study abroad programs have been found to be excellent teaching practices to learn about leadership and provide an international context for students to apply their

leadership knowledge (Earnst, 2003). The high-impact practice of study abroad was also found to have a positive effect on students' social responsibility (Lee, 2010).

Leadership instructors have established capstone courses, which can be classified as high-impact practices. A capstone experience that provides students the opportunity to apply their leadership skills and develop career preparation assignments was found to be a successful culmination of the leadership degree program (Gifford, Cannon, Stedman, & Telg, 2011) and provide opportunities for students to make meaning of their undergraduate leadership degree (Moore, Odom, & Wied, 2011).

Specifically in the leadership classroom, educators rely on group or team projects to study leadership. Students have reported positive attitudes toward group work and application of leadership learning to a team experience (Coers, Lorensen, & Anderson, 2009; Weeks & Kelsey, 2007). Learning communities within the leadership classroom have also been utilized, helping students develop a sense of belonging and friendship with their peers and providing a positive avenue to explore leadership concepts (Nahavandi, 2006).

In the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Leadership Education*, Huber (2002) stated the importance for leadership educators to provide active learning environments that prepare learners for an ever-changing world. To meet the expectations of students and the demands for future leaders of change, the leadership classroom has become a hybrid environment that provides opportunities for students to learn leadership and then apply their knowledge through experiential activities.

The idea of providing leadership students with direct, purposeful experiences is not necessarily a new concept. Edgar Dale created the cone of experience (1946) in which he graphically represented different learning experiences. Dale depicted the most influential learning experiences, such as direct, firsthand experiences, at the base of the cone and lesser experiences, such as those occurring through verbal symbols, at the top of the cone. Dale's original cone of experience contained the following categories starting at the tip and moving toward the base: Verbal Symbols, Visual Symbols, Radio Recordings-Still Pictures, Motion Pictures, Exhibits, Field Trips, Demonstrations, Dramatic Participation, Contrived Experiences, and Direct Purposeful Experiences. Dale (1970) noted, "Difficulties arise when abstractions have inadequate foundations... Because a verbal symbol does not resemble anything the child can do or see, he may have difficulty in relating it to his own experience" (p. 98). Similar to Dale's cone of experience (1946), high-impact practices seek to provide students with concrete experiences as opposed to more abstract experiences.

The purpose of this application brief is to describe the undergraduate leadership teaching assistant (ULTA) experience as a high-impact practice for undergraduates studying leadership. This application brief uses the six characteristics of effective high-impact practices (Kuh, 2008) as a framework for describing the undergraduate leadership teaching assistant experience as it relates to a high-impact practice for undergraduates studying leadership. Scholars suggest undergraduate teaching assistants provide a

reciprocal benefit between faculty members and students (Fingerson, & Culley, 2001; Roberts, Lilly, & Rollins, 1995). The undergraduate teaching assistant has been compared to the experience of undergraduate research (Schalk, McGinnis, Haring, Hendrickson, & Smith, 2009), which has been highlighted as a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008).

As universities become more transparent and budgets diminish, faculties identify highly motivated undergraduates to assist them with courses (Firmin, 2008). Faculty members must remain innovative and find means to complete the same teaching loads with fewer resources. The ULTA experience is a potential opportunity for students to participate in a high-impact practice while providing a service to faculty members.

Description of Application

At Texas A&M University, the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications (ALEC) relies on ULTAs to support the core leadership education coursework. The ALEC department has used ULTAs as part of instructional staffs for a number of years. The experience supports the professor's role by helping with some of the ordinary tasks of teaching: facilitating class activities, responding to student inquiries outside of class, organizing papers, taking attendance, and recording participation points. Completing the routine yet purposeful and important tasks, ULTAs provide instructors with additional time to implement more meaningful experiences for students in their courses. The ULTA is not a paid position; compensation is in the form of course credit, which is also graded by the instructor of the ULTA. ULTAs are usually selected by faculty through an application process available to students enrolled in the course the semester prior. Selection of ULTAs varies by course and instructor, but some consistent criteria used in the selection process includes: quality of assignments completed as a student while enrolled in the course, attendance and more importantly participation and engagement in the course, demonstrated desire to learn more about leadership, and grade in the course. In the ALEC department, ULTAs have seven roles:

1. Support the active learning components of leadership courses.
2. Engage students in leadership learning.
3. Provide feedback to leadership students through questions, conversations, and discussions (face-to-face and online).
4. Serve as a mentor to students enrolled in leadership courses.
5. Provide support to the leadership instructor in regards to attendance, class activities, and assignments.
6. Serve as a role model for leadership students by practicing good classroom behavior.
7. Integrate leadership learning from undergraduate leadership coursework into the teaching assistant experience.

The ULTA can also benefit tremendously from the experience enabling them to deepen their level of understanding of leadership concepts and providing opportunities to lead their peers in the classroom. Through the ULTA experience, students develop:

knowledge of human cultures and the physical and natural world, personal and social responsibility, and integrative and applied learning (Kuh, 2008). The objectives of the ULTA experience within the ALEC department include the following:

1. Develop skills that will be valuable in a future career.
2. Deepen understanding of the leadership field of study.
3. Broaden points of view of teaching leadership.
4. Experience working with a diverse audience.

To accomplish their roles and responsibilities, ULTAs are required to attend and participate in each class and weekly ULTA meetings, complete weekly activities, readings, and journal activities, and an end-of-semester portfolio. Weekly journal prompts consist of the following topics: creation of questions to engage students on the topics, examples and ways to help students better understand the material, characteristics they will try and model as an ULTA, leadership skills developed during the respective week, leadership perspectives gained, and how the ULTA can apply what they have learned that week to future roles.

The ULTAs email their journal reflections to the instructor prior to each weekly course meeting or create a blog to document their weekly reflections. Instructors discuss the ULTA responses during meetings and provide feedback to the ULTAs during this time. By reading the reflections, instructors can assess the ULTA's learning over the course of the semester (formatively) versus solely at the end of the semester (summatively). The reflections also give ULTAs the opportunity to suggest different ways of teaching the content and thus help the instructor to stay current on pedagogies for teaching different groups of students.

Discussion of the Outcomes

The purpose of this application brief is to describe the ULTA experience as a high-impact practice for undergraduates studying leadership. The ULTA experience was examined using the framework of the six characteristics purported by Kuh (2008) in regards to what makes a high-impact practice effective.

Characteristic 1: Considerable time and effort to purposeful tasks; deepened investment

Students who participate in an ULTA experience spend a considerable amount of time and are invested in the activity. Not only do students attend class, they complete weekly journals and have weekly meetings with instructors about journal content, participate in leading small group discussions in class, teach content, and assist the faculty member with tasks. They also respond to student emails and inquiries outside of class time.

Characteristic 2: Demand interaction with faculty and peers over substantive matters

The ULTA experience provides a more collaborative and participatory approach to learning than the traditional college class (Fingerson & Culley, 2001). The relationship built between a faculty member and an ULTA is a deep connection where both members rely on each other for support to effectively teach the college curricula. Students who

participate in ULTA experiences gain a deeper understanding of course material and develop professional skills (Schalk et al., 2009).

Characteristic 3: Increased likelihood of experiencing diversity

One of the specific objectives of the ULTA experience at Texas A&M University in the ALEC department is to experience working with a diverse audience. Because ULTAs are most often utilized in high-enrollment courses, the likelihood of students experiencing diversity through contact with people who are different than themselves is great through the ULTA experience. Students interact with all students in entire courses and they may be challenged to develop ways of thinking and responding to individuals who are different than them. Differences may include race or ethnicity, but also include those who differ in ways of thinking.

Characteristic 4: Frequent feedback about their performance

Because students work closely with faculty on a daily or weekly basis, there is an opportunity to receive feedback. Weekly meetings allow for ULTAs to have almost immediate feedback on their behaviors and experience. Journal entries are turned in to the instructor prior to the weekly meetings and discussion occurs about the reflections. ULTA's questions and concerns are heard and instructors can seize the opportunity for in-depth interactions with the ULTA during the weekly meetings.

Characteristic 5: Opportunities to see how learning works in different settings

Serving as an ULTA provides a learning laboratory for students to apply their academic knowledge to their roles on the instructional staff and practice their skills with their peers. One of the weekly journal questions prompts ULTAs to apply what they have learned through their experience to other areas of their life.

Characteristic 6: Better understanding of self in relation to others

The ULTA experience allows undergraduates the opportunity to reflect on and modify their personal goals which can lead to life-changing experiences such as being involved in undergraduate research, getting involved in professional organizations, and choosing to attend graduate school. Developing an understanding of personal leadership strengths and weaknesses has been identified as an important objective for an agricultural leadership program (Morgan, King, Rudd, & Kaufman, 2013). At Texas A&M University in the ALEC department, at least one ULTA decided to apply and attend graduate school to further their study about leadership. This student valued the opportunity as an ULTA to gain experience in working with college students on a different level. The ULTA experience opened up the eyes of this ULTA to the possibilities in teaching at the collegiate level. Several other ULTAs have joined a professional leadership organization and become involved with undergraduate research because of their ULTA experience.

Reflections from Practitioners

“If we are to teach leadership as practice, we must create conditions in which leadership can be practiced” (Ganz & Lin, 2012, p. 355). The ULTA experience provides students with the opportunity to go beyond learning about leadership to acquiring leadership through experiential learning. As Ganz and Lin (2012) noted, “learning leadership is far more challenging than learning about leadership” (p. 354). To accomplish the goal of ULTAs learning leadership, instructors must intentionally design the experience so they can ask questions at all levels of learning, model effective behaviors in the classroom,

gain additional perspectives on leadership, and articulate what they have learned. The ULTA experience, when designed and implemented effectively, has the potential to do this as “students thus enjoy an opportunity to learn their ‘practice’ in interaction with real constituents, yet with access to coaching, feedback, and instruction” (Gan & Lin, 2012, p. 359).

High-impact practices should be intentional, easily integrated, and lead to essential learning outcomes for students. The ULTA experience can be a highly synergistic experience and lead to learning outcomes for students that better prepare them for future careers. An ULTA experience includes a variety of responsibilities and provides an opportunity for leadership students to apply course material and further develop their understanding of personal leadership strengths and weaknesses, an important objective for an agricultural leadership program (Morgan et al., 2013).

Recommendations for Practice

It is important for faculty to remember the six characteristics that make a high-impact practice beneficial for students (Kuh, 2008). Students engaging in high-impact practices with faculty members report friendly and supportive relationships with the faculty member (Kuh, 2008). For ULTA experiences to be high-impact, students must interact with faculty and peers over extended periods of time and receive feedback about their performance (Kuh, 2008). For ULTAs to truly learn leadership, instructors must model leadership. This requires effort on the part of the instructor to make time to meet with students regularly about substantive matters relating to the course as well as their personal and professional leadership development. Instructors must hold regular meetings and discuss ULTA journal entries and performance to provide feedback to the ULTA.

A high-impact practice requires students to invest time and effort (Kuh, 2008). The ULTA in leadership education must make time to prepare and assess course material. Through preparation and assessment, an ULTA must develop a purposeful relationship with the faculty member to create a successful leadership environment for students. Participation in high-impact practices also requires students to reflect, evaluate their perspectives, and make changes (Kuh, 2008). The ULTA experience requires an ULTA to evaluate himself or herself as a leader and determine if any changes in values, perceptions, or behaviors need to be modified to enhance their leadership ability. It is recommended that faculty consider a rigorous recruitment process that includes an application. Factors to consider when recruiting ULTAs include the ability of ULTAs to build rapport and relationships with instructors, other ULTAs, and students enrolled in the course. Participating in the ULTA practice increases the opportunities for students to work with diverse groups of people and provide a variety of contexts to apply their learning (Kuh, 2008). Faculty should also evaluate how well potential ULTAs understand course material, not only the grade they received in the class, but their passion for the subject matter. The ability of potential ULTAs to develop skills in facilitation and record keeping should also be considered as these skills are paramount to helping the faculty member be better organized in the classroom.

It is also recommended that instructors have ULTAs attend a training session prior to the start of the semester. If instructors are at a larger institution where multiple ULTAs are being used in multiple courses, multiple instructors could work together to deliver the training to all ULTAs each semester rather than individual instructors working only with their ULTAs to avoid duplication of effort. If this is not possible, it is recommended that instructors use time within regularly scheduled meetings to infuse content related to teaching methods and classroom management.

The ULTA experience will not be a high-impact practice available to a large number of students. Leadership instructors should explore the right ratio for their needs. If there are too many ULTAs, the ULTA may feel underutilized and not see the maximum effect of the experience. If there are not enough ULTAs, the ULTA may feel over-utilized and frustrated with the amount of work they are doing. The ratio of ULTAs to students enrolled varies in the ALEC department at Texas A&M University, but an average range would be about one ULTA for every 30-40 students enrolled. Another factor to consider in regard to number of ULTAs is the time required to read the ULTA journals weekly. Ensuring the ULTA experience is beneficial for both instructor and student does take time initially, but once the semester begins and both parties have developed a relationship, the process becomes synergistic and mutually reinforcing as the journals can provide immediate and valuable feedback to the instructor.

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