

Effective Leadership Development for Undergraduates: How Important is Active Participation in Collegiate Organizations?

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Abstract

Leaders are needed in all areas of life. A question arises, “Where do leaders come from and how do they develop the skills necessary to be effective?” Colleges and universities have been developing leadership skills since their inception (Astin, 1996). This study examined students in a college of agriculture to determine if students’ perceptions about leadership skills varied based on participation in collegiate organizations and whether a participant held a collegiate officer position. Results indicated 55% were active in collegiate organizations and 23% held an officer position. For the most part student perceptions related to the impact on leadership skill development did not vary between the groups and were “positive” in nature. It was noted that approximately 36% of all responses were

“negative” toward the collegiate organizations’ ability to develop leadership skills. Therefore, recommendations include that individuals in leadership positions should examine their organizations’ ability to develop members’ leadership abilities.

Introduction and Conceptual Framework

The future success of local communities, states, and the country is tied to the development of quality leaders. Leadership, though often hard to define concretely, in its most basic form can be described as influencing others towards achieving a common goal (Northouse, 2001). As such, leadership is needed in all organizations and at all levels of government (Astin, 1996; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2000; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Furthermore, many employers indicate a desire for employees to possess a diverse set of leadership skills (Astin, 1996; Bennis, Spreitzer, & Cummings, 2001; Bruening & Shao, 2005; Irani, Place, & Friedel, 2006; National Association of Colleges and Employers, 2000; van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Layfield, Radhakrishna, and Andreasen (2000) summarized ways in which faculty worked to help students develop leadership skills; one of the most important being the inclusion of leadership opportunities in and outside of the classroom. Individuals must be given the opportunity to lead during their everyday lives; this includes students that are pursuing higher education. Without the opportunity to practice leading a group, growth in skill may not occur.

Colleges and universities have been committed to building students’ leadership skills and abilities since their inception (Astin, 1996), which is often illustrated through their mission statements (Boatman, 1999). Collegiate venues where students can learn and enhance their leadership skills include student service programs, collegiate organizations, and through service learning projects. For instance, Seemiller (2006) asserts that participation in *The Social Change Project* (a service learning project) encourages students to recognize the need for leadership in creating effective social change which supports active utilization of these same leadership concepts in the future. Astin (1999) posited that there was a positive relationship between student participation in college, both academic and extracurricular, and student development. Boatman (1999) pointed out that colleges use both formal (i.e., classroom and laboratory instruction) and informal (i.e., student organizations) methods to enhance student leadership abilities. Finally, Engbers (2006) notes a significant increase in leadership development programs across college campuses, and ties this to a need for effective leadership development in preparing tomorrow’s leaders – and ultimately, the importance of leadership in society.

The importance of participation in student organizations to developing leadership skills has also been reported in several studies. Rutherford, Townsend, Briers, Cummins, and Conrad (2002) concluded that everyone can be a leader, but “individuals do not possess all the skills or expertise to always lead” (p. 30). Specifically, the authors found that student perception of leadership ability was higher for high school FFA members compared to non-members. Thus, leadership skill and ability may be perceived higher for members of collegiate organizations when compared with non-members. Birkenholz and Schumacher (1994) found that several college activities, such as being part of a departmental club, social fraternities and sororities, student government, professional or honorary fraternities, and intramural clubs and organizations, were significant indicators of perceived leadership abilities. Shertzer and Schuh (2004) concluded that those students holding leadership positions while in college were often given additional leadership development opportunities when compared to those members that did not hold leadership positions.

Important to the context of this study, Colleges of Agriculture (COA) students have traditionally differed from their main campus counterparts. Historically, student enrollment has been comprised primarily of students from rural communities (Raven & Barrick, 1992; Reisch, 1984). As educators in the College of Agriculture, we used to know who our students were and could program accordingly. However, that is no longer the case. COA students are looking more diverse than ever. Many have limited agriculture knowledge and are increasingly coming from urban as well as rural areas (Dyer, Breja, & Andreasen, 1999; Irani, Place & Friedel, 2006; Osborne & Dyer, 2000). With an increasing number of students coming in from different backgrounds and situations, new opportunities have emerged. Society, as well as our student population, is changing. As such, the need for leadership development for COA students is crucial.

The salience of developing leadership skills in students seems to be clear. However, those individuals slated with the all-important task of developing these leadership skills and abilities may not always think about the details associated with development.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to examine student perceptions regarding the impact of participation in collegiate organizations. More specifically, the objectives of the study were to:

1. Describe the demographic characteristics of the undergraduate students in the college of agriculture;
2. Describe membership status in collegiate organizations of the undergraduate students in the college of agriculture; and,

3. Describe participant perceptions related to the impact on leadership skill development through participation in collegiate organizations for individuals that held officer positions compared to those individuals that did not hold an officer position in these organizations.

Methods

Descriptive survey methods were used to examine college of agriculture students' perceptions related to leadership abilities. The survey instrument was administered via SurveyMonkey, a web-survey tool, after obtaining the university's Institutional Review Board's approval. The SurveyMonkey survey system collected student responses via the internet and held the data until the researchers completed the study and imported the data into SPSS.

Due to an interest in collecting data related to a specific population, a census was conducted rather than employing sampling techniques. The target population of this study was all college of agriculture students currently enrolled at a large land-grant institution. A total of 2,056 students were enrolled in the college when the frame was obtained from the Office of the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education. Five of the e-mail addresses were invalid and undeliverable. Thus, a total of 2,051 students had the opportunity to respond to the survey instrument. A total of 789 students (39%) responded to the invitation to take part in the study. The statistical technique of comparing early to late respondents (Miller & Smith, 1983) was used to control for non-response error.

Respondents to the initial invitation, the first reminder invitation, and second reminder invitation, for a total of three contacts, were considered "early" respondents. Those individuals responding to the fourth and later invitations were considered "late" respondents. The dates for the initial invitation and reminder invitations were set *a priori* by the researchers for comparison of early to late respondents. A total of 131 responses were considered late. Thus, 17% of the responses were considered to be late respondents; an acceptable percentage for statistical comparison. A comparison of responses from the "early" to "late" respondents revealed that there was no statistical difference between the early and late respondents in this study.

Dillman's (2000) advice on conducting internet surveys was consulted when designing the study. Incentives were offered to respondents of this survey. All respondents were entered into a drawing for 25 gift certificates worth 20 dollars each that could be used at the university book store. The data, including reliability tests, was analyzed and appropriate descriptive statistics were obtained using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 14.0).

Validity for the survey instrument used in the study was established through a panel of experts in teacher and leadership education. Each expert reviewed the instrument for face and content validity. Following the field test, comments from the experts were used to make changes to increase the face validity of the instrument. The panel found no concerns related to the content validity of the instrument.

Post-Hoc reliability for the survey instrument was determined using the Cronbach's Alpha procedure. Reliability for the survey instrument was $\alpha=.77$. Data was downloaded from the SurveyMonkey data collection system into SPSS. Data was analyzed using descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages.

As part of this survey instrument, students were asked to respond to several demographic questions. The participants were asked if they were a member of any student organizations within the college and to indicate whether the respondent had ever, or currently, held an officer position within one of these collegiate organizations. As a follow-up to this particular question, the respondents were asked to identify the position, or positions, that were held currently or in the past. The status of whether the student held an officer position, this factor was used to compare the perceptions of these two groups. Officer position was chosen due to the fact that most organizations within the college have "regular" officer teams, while other leadership positions vary widely depending on the organization's structure.

Finally, those participants that indicated they had been at some time a member of any collegiate organization were asked to respond seven statements related to the impact of participating in a collegiate organization. All information for this study was collected at the nominal level of measurement.

Results

The target population for this study was all students in the College of Agricultural Sciences at a large land-grant institution. Due to the control for non-response, results for this study's objectives can be generalized to the current population of students at this particular land-grant institution. Demographic information was gathered to inform the researchers and reader of specific characteristics of the population of interest. Student major was the first demographic characteristic of interest. Nearly 33% of all respondents were Animal Science majors, with Agribusiness (8.5%) and Forestry (6.7%) rounding out the top three (see Table 1).

Other demographic information of interest included gender, age, and class rank as defined by current semester standing. Respondents were predominantly female

(60%), with a majority of the respondents being between 19-22 years old. Specifically, respondents' ages were: 9% 18 years of age or under, 41% 19-20 years old, 38% 21-22 years old, 7% 23-24 years old, and 5 % 25 years of age or older. Interestingly, the most uniform statistics occur within the respondents' current semester in college where the numbers are all very close: Freshman – 24%, Sophomore – 21%, Junior – 24%, Senior – 29%, and Other – 2%.

Table 1
Percentage of Respondents by Major

Rank	Major	<i>f</i>	%
1.	Animal Science	258	32.6
2.	Agribusiness	67	8.5
3.	Forestry	53	6.7
4.	Wildlife and Fisheries Science	45	5.7
5.	Environmental and Renewable Resource Economics	38	4.8
6.	Agriculture and Extension Education	35	4.4
7.	Food Science	33	4.2
8.	Agricultural Science	32	4.0
9 (tie).	Landscape Contracting	25	3.2
9 (tie).	Horticulture	25	3.2
10.	Turfgrass Management	22	2.8

Table 2 reflects whether respondents held or had never held an officer position within a collegiate student organization. One-hundred, eighty-four (23 %) of the participants identified themselves as officers and 605 (77 %) responded as never holding an officer position.

Table 2
Responses of Officer Position Held in Collegiate Student Organizations (n=789)

Officer Position Held	<i>f</i>	%
Yes	184	23
No	605	77
Total	789	100

Note: Of those participants responding “no” to the question, 355 were not members of collegiate organizations.

To address the second objective of the study, respondents were asked to indicate whether they currently participate in or have ever participated in a student organization within the College of Agricultural Sciences. Overall, 55% (n=434) of the respondents indicated that they had participated in a collegiate organization. In contrast, 45% (n=355) of the respondents indicated they had not participated in a collegiate student organization (see Table 3).

Table 3
Responses of Membership in Collegiate Student Organizations (n=789)

Member	<i>F</i>	%
Yes	447	55
No	355	45
Total	789	100

Objective three was developed to describe the perceptions of individuals that held officer positions compared to those individuals that did not hold an officer position. Specifically, the participants were asked to agree or disagree with each statement based on their experience in a collegiate organization. Table 4 displays the frequency and percentage of responses for the participants related to each of the seven statements related to impact of a collegiate organization on the participant. The table is also divided between those individuals that have held an officer position and those that have not held an officer position in a collegiate organization.

Table 4
 “Officer” and “Non-officer” Responses to Statements Related to Participation in Collegiate Organizations (n=447)

Statement	<i>Held an Officer Position (n=184)</i>		<i>Did Not Hold a Officer Position (n=263)</i>	
	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>
<i>Participation in collegiate organizations have:</i>				
1. Allowed me to participate in activities that I would not have otherwise been able to experience.	158	26	188	75
2. Allowed me to reflect on the importance of the activities in which I participate.	118	66	119	144
3. Allowed me to learn about my strengths as an individual.	136	48	133	130
4. Helped me realize that my participation in activities has an impact beyond myself.	134	50	134	129
5. Allowed me to apply learning from the organization's activities to other areas of my life.	125	59	120	143
6. Allowed me to build relationships with people that have similar interests.	163	21	197	66
7. Prepared me for my future career.	141	43	150	113

Statement Number One. One-hundred, fifty-eight individuals (out of a total of 184) that held an officer position believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed them to take part in activities that would not have been available otherwise. Only 14% (26/184) of officer respondents believed that they could get these experiences elsewhere. Of the respondents who did not hold an officer position, a majority 71% (188/263) still believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed them to take part in activities that would not have been available otherwise. Alternatively, 29% of respondents that did not hold officer positions believed that they could get these experiences elsewhere.

Statement Number Two. One-hundred, eighteen of the officer respondents believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed them to reflect on the importance of activities in which they participated. Sixty-six participants that

held officer positions believed that participation in collegiate organizations did not allow for reflection on activities in which they participated. A minority 45% (119/263) of individuals that did not hold an officer position believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed them to reflect on the activities in which they participated. Fifty-five percent (144/263) of respondents who did not hold officer positions believed that participation did not allow for reflection on the activities.

Statement Number Three. Seventy-four percent (136/184) of the individuals that held an officer position believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed them to learn about their individual strengths. Forty-eight participants (or 26 %) that held officer positions believed that participation in collegiate organizations did not allow them to learn about their strengths as an individual. A close 51% (133/263) of non-officer respondents believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed them to learn about their individual strengths, while 49% within this non-officer group believed that participation in collegiate organizations did not help them discover anything about their individual strengths.

Statement Number Four. One-hundred, thirty-four individuals that held an officer position believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed them to realize that their participation in activities had an impact beyond themselves. Fifty participants that held officer positions believed that participation in collegiate organizations did not help them to realize that their participation in activities had an impact beyond themselves. Fifty-one percent (134/263) of individuals that did not hold an officer position believed that participation in collegiate organizations helped them to realize that their participation in activities had an impact beyond themselves. Similarly, 49% (129/263) of participants that did not hold officer positions believed that participation in collegiate organizations helped them to realize that their participation in activities had an impact beyond themselves.

Statement Number Five. Sixty-eight percent (125/184) of officer respondents believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed for application of learning from the organization's activities to other areas of life. Only 32% of participants that held officer positions believed that participation in collegiate organizations did not allow for application of learning from the organization's activities to other areas of life. Forty-six percent (120/263) of individuals that did not hold an officer position believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed for application of learning from the organization's activities to other areas of life. One hundred and forty-three participants that did not hold officer positions believed that participation in collegiate activities did not allow for application of learning from the organization's activities to other areas of life.

Statement Number Six. One-hundred, sixty-three individuals that held an officer position believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed them to build relationships with people that have similar interests. Twenty-one participants that held officer positions believed that participation in collegiate organizations did not allow for the building of relationships with people that have similar interests. A majority 75% (197/263) of individuals that did not hold an officer position believed that participating in collegiate organizations allowed for the building relationships with people that have similar interests. Only 25% (66/263) of non-officer respondents believed that participation allowed for the building of relationships with people that have similar interests to themselves.

Statement Number Seven. A majority 77% (114/184) of officer respondents believed that participating in collegiate organizations helped them to prepare for a future career. Forty-three participants that held officer positions believed that participation in collegiate organizations did not help to prepare for a future career. Then again, 57% (150/263) of the participants that did not hold an officer position believed that participating in collegiate organizations helped to prepare for a future career. Forty-three percent of the non-officer respondents assumed that participation in collegiate organizations did not help prepare for a future career.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Leadership skill development is important for our leaders of tomorrow. As participating in collegiate groups and organizations is a great way to develop leadership experientially, a primary objective of this study was to determine the membership status of students in the college of agriculture. Over one-half of the respondents were involved in at least one collegiate organization. In due course, respondents not participating in a collegiate organization should be encouraged to explore the opportunities offered through participation in collegiate organizations. Further research should be conducted to examine the reasons that students choose not to participate in collegiate organizations during their time in college.

Along with membership status, information related to which individuals held office was explored. Approximately 25% of all participants responded that they held an officer position at some point during their membership. Thus, approximately 75% of students responded that they did not hold an officer position. These numbers seem reasonable based on the size of officer teams of many organizations. However, of the students responding that they did not hold an officer position, over half did not participate in a collegiate organization. This seems to indicate that students not holding officer roles are not participating in collegiate organizations and not taking on leadership roles. To the contrary, this may mean students are not participating in collegiate activities and organizations at all. Further research should also be conducted to examine if opportunities were

available for students to participate as officers, or if there was no interest on the part of the student to participate in an organization in the first place.

The final objective of the study was to describe participant perceptions related to the impact on leadership skill development through participation in collegiate organizations; comparing individuals that held officer positions to those individuals that did not. While most of the individuals that held office responded positively to all seven of the statements related to this objective, an equal number of individuals not holding leadership roles responded similarly. Does this mean that simply participating (at any level) in a collegiate organization builds student confidence in their leadership skills? Does participation, and not necessarily holding an office, contribute more to perceived leadership ability? As leadership educators within colleges and universities, we often find ourselves searching for ways to improve our students' leadership competence. This research may suggest a change in the way we program – providing less emphasis on leadership roles once you gain membership to an organization and more emphasis on providing opportunities for individuals to gain membership to organizations which match their personal or professional goals. Future research should be conducted to describe what factors determine whether a student perceives participation in collegiate organizations as beneficial to developing leadership skills.

Also of note in objective number three, were the two statements that received the lowest percentage of “positive” response – “Participation in collegiate organizations allowed me to reflect on the importance of the activities in which I participate” and “Participation in collegiate organizations allowed me to apply learning from the organization's activities to other areas of my life.” Individuals that work with student organizations should consider the impact that reflection and application play in leadership development. Students should be able to reflect on their collegiate organization experiences and become better leaders because of them. This should include the opportunity to apply organizational experiences to other areas of life, including potential career areas. Advisors, officers, and members of collegiate organizations should consider implementing opportunities for reflection following organizational activities that help members grow as leaders. If the organization is not currently offering opportunities for reflection in this capacity, advisors should search out ways to enhance this component of learning. Organizations should incorporate activities and other learning opportunities into the program plan that allow students to make the connection between those opportunities and future life experiences.

Results related to objective three did not indicate that holding an office influenced student perceptions more positively regarding leadership skill development than not doing so. However, negative responses to any of the statements in this study should be considered as opportunities for organizational change. Why do some students feel that a particular collegiate organization is not providing skills for the

future, or not providing opportunities for networking and relationship building?
How can a collegiate organization build opportunities into their program plan that will allow students to reflect and learn skills that will benefit the student for life?

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