

Using Achievement Motivation Theory to Explain Student Participation in a Residential Leadership Learning Community

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Abstract

This study sought to examine student motives for participating in a residential leadership learning community for incoming freshmen using McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory (McClelland, 1958, 1961). Eighty-nine students began the program in the Fall 2009 semester and were administered a single, researcher-developed instrument. Responses to an open-ended question that asked students what their primary motive for participating in the voluntary, residential leadership learning community were analyzed using deductive content analysis techniques (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009; Patton, 2002) and categorized according to McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory as the need for Achievement, the need for Power, the need for Affiliation, or any combination thereof. Results demonstrated that while all three needs were found within the responses, the need

for Achievement and the need for Affiliation were more common motives for joining the voluntary, residential leadership learning community.

Introduction

According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2002), “students are flocking to college because the world is complex, turbulent, and more reliant on knowledge than ever before” (p. viii). Teaching these students about leadership and their development as leaders is becoming increasingly more important to colleges and universities across the country (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001). However, some would argue that “our education practice has emphasized information transfer without a great deal of thought given to the meaning, pertinence, or application of the information in the context of the student’s life” (Keeling, 2004, p. 10). In other words, academic learning and student development have often been viewed separately from each other (Keeling). This notion is supported by Minor (1997) who noted that faculty often think of courses taking place only in traditional classroom settings while residence hall programs focus on dimensions of student development. What is needed is the view of “learning as a comprehensive, holistic, transformative activity that integrates academic learning and student development” (Keeling, 2004, p. 4).

“In his book *Achieving Educational Excellence*, Alexander Astin describes learning communities as ‘small sub-groups of students...characterized by a common sense of purpose...that can be used to build a sense of group identity, cohesiveness and uniqueness that encourages continuity and the integration of diverse curricular and co-curricular experiences’” (Minor, 1997, p. 21). Minor noted that while students who are enrolled in common courses, a typical practice in learning communities, might exhibit many characteristics that describe learning communities as defined by Astin, “the potential for their success is significantly enhanced by making use of a location where a majority of freshman spend most of their time – the residence halls” (p. 21). Keeling (2004) described student affairs and academic affairs partnerships, such as residential learning communities in which students are all enrolled in one or more of the same classes and live together, as an example of a transformative learning opportunity for students. According to Keeling, “these ‘powerful partnerships,’ jointly planned, combine knowledge acquisition and experiential learning to promote more complex outcomes” (p. 20). Residential learning communities require that faculty members and student affairs professionals “come together for the overriding purpose of the college experience: educating the same students together” (Gablenick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990, p. 91).

Researchers have studied learning communities developed specifically for freshmen students (Minor, 1997; Nahavandi, 2006; Stedman, Arnold, & Rotter, 2006) and have examined their impact on various factors (Staub & Finley, 2007; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). A study involving Freshmen Interest Group (FIG) students at

the University of Oregon (cited in Gabelnick, et al., 1990) discovered that “FIG students differed from other freshman only in being a little more anxious about making friends and having slightly more elevated expectations about their academic success at the university” (p. 62). Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, and Smith (1990) also discussed a study of 1000 students enrolled in learning communities and comparable traditional classes at 12 community colleges in Washington that was conducted by the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education during the 1997-1988 academic year which found that “students in both groups were similar in average age and gender break-down; all were highly oriented to completing a four-year college degree, although this was slightly more true of students in learning communities” (p. 62). Similarly, in a meta-analysis of more than 300 studies, Johnson, Johnson, and Smith (Cited in Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) found “learning communities foster development of supportive peer groups, greater student involvement in the classroom learning and social activities, perceptions of greater academic development, and greater integration of students’ academic and nonacademic lives” (p. 423). Gabelnick et al. (1990) ultimately identified eight themes related to what students’ value about their experiences in a learning community including friendships and a sense of belonging, learning collaboratively, intellectual energy and confidence, appreciation of other students’ perspectives, discovering texts, the building of intellectual connections, embracing complexity, and new perspectives on their own learning process.

Fewer studies, however, have been found that explored the motives behind why students participate in learning communities. At some universities, such as Dickinson College, participation in a first-year seminar is required (Staub & Finley, 2007). In 2003 Dickinson began linking similar first-year seminars into residential learning communities that contained out-of-the-classroom educational experiences. Zhao and Kuh (2004) found in their study of 80,479 randomly selected first-year and senior students from 364 four-year colleges and universities who completed the National Survey of Student Engagement in the Spring of 2002, Zhao and Kuh (2004) that native students (as opposed to transfer students), students of color, members of fraternities and sororities, full-time students, students in preprofessional majors, and those with two or more majors were most likely to participate in learning communities. When looking only at the first-year students, Zhao and Kuh concluded that students from families with lower levels of parental education and students who lived on campus were more likely to participate in learning communities.

The question must be asked, “What motivates first-year students to participate in optional residential learning communities that require both in-class and out-of-class experiences?” This study sought to explore the motives behind student participation in a voluntary, residential learning community that focused on leadership at Texas A&M University. The students were all traditional-aged, incoming first-year students, and in addition to enrolling in a one-credit academic

class focused on leadership each semester of their first year, they also agreed to live on the same floor of an on-campus residence hall.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was rooted in McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory. "Achievement Motivation Theory attempts to explain and predict behavior and performance based on a person's need for achievement, power, and affiliation" (Lussier & Achua, 2007, p. 42). The Achievement Motivation Theory is also referred to as the Acquired Needs Theory or the Learned Needs Theory. Daft (2008) defined the Acquired Needs Theory as "McClelland's theory that proposes that certain types of needs (achievement, affiliation, power) are acquired during an individual's lifetime" (p. 233).

The Achievement Motivation Theory evolved from work McClelland began in the 1940s. In 1958 McClelland described human motives in the Methods of Measuring Human Motivation chapter of Atkinson's book, *Motives in Fantasy, Action, and Society*. At that point, McClelland identified human motives related to the achievement motive, the affiliation motive, the sexual motive, and the power motive. In his later work, *The Achieving Society* (McClelland, 1961), however, McClelland focused his attention on only need for Achievement, the need for Affiliation, and the need for Power. In essence, McClelland's theory postulates that people are motivated in varying degrees by their need for Achievement, need for Power, and need for Affiliation and that these needs are acquired, or learned, during an individual's lifetime (Daft, 2008; Lussier & Achua, 2007). In other words, most people possess and will exhibit a combination of three needs.

Need for Achievement

McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, and Lowell (1958) defined the need for Achievement (*n* Achievement) as "success in competition with some standard of excellence. That is, the goal of some individual in the story is to be successful in terms of competition with some standard of excellence. The individual may fail to achieve this goal, but the concern over competition with a standard of excellence still enables one to identify the goal sought as an achievement goal. This, then, is our generic definition of *n* Achievement" (p. 181).

McClelland et al. (1958) went on to describe that competition with a standard of excellence was most notable when an individual was in direct competition with someone else but that it can also be evident in the concern for how well one individual performs a task, regardless of how someone else is doing. According to Lussier and Achua (2007), "the need for achievement is the unconscious concern for excellence in accomplishments through individual efforts" (p. 42). Similarly, Daft (2008) stated the need for Achievement is "the desire to accomplish something difficult, attain a high standard of success, master complex tasks, and

surpass others” (p. 233). Individuals who exhibit the need for Achievement seek to accomplish realistic but challenging goals.

Need for Power

McClelland (1961) defined the need for Power as a “concern ‘with the control of the means of influencing a person’” (p. 167). Lussier and Achua (2007) defined the need for Power as “the unconscious concern for influencing others and seeking positions of authority” (p. 42). Similarly, Daft (2008) defined the need for Power as “the desire to influence or control others, be responsible for others, and have authority over others” (p. 233). Individuals who exhibit the need for Power have a desire to be influential and want to make an impact.

Need for Affiliation

When defining the need for Affiliation, McClelland (1961) stated, “Affiliation...establishing, maintaining, or restoring a positive affective relationship with another person. This relationship is most adequately described by the word friendship” (p. 160). Therefore, “the need for affiliation is the unconscious concern for developing, maintaining, and restoring close personal relationships” (Lussier & Achua, 2007, p. 43). Daft (2008) defined the need for Affiliation as “the desire to form close personal relationships, avoid conflict, and establish warm friendships” (p. 233). Individuals who exhibit the need for Affiliation are seeking interactions with other people.

Purpose

The purpose of this study, conducted as part of a larger study, was to explore why students participated in a voluntary, residential learning community focused on leadership. More specifically, this study intended to determine if students were motivated to participate because of their need for Achievement, need for Power, or need for Affiliation. Therefore, the guiding research question for this study was “What was your primary motive for participating in the Leadership Living Learning Community?”

Methodology

The population frame for this study was a census of students who participated in the Leadership Living Learning Community (L3C) at Texas A&M University during the 2009-2010 academic year. The program was developed as a partnership between the Department of Residence Life and the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications and is now in its fifth year. Invitations to apply for the 5th cohort of students were sent to all freshmen accepted to the university. Initially, 145 of the 15,158 students accepted into the university submitted applications to be considered for the program. Some applicants were not eligible to participate in this residential learning community

due to the specific programmatic requirements. Eighty-nine of the 145 students who applied accepted invitations to participate. Therefore, the population frame for this study consisted of the 89 students who began the program in the Fall 2009.

In an effort to sample the entire population frame, all 89 participants were administered a single, researcher-developed instrument designed to collect data related to why participants applied and agreed to participate in the L3C and their expectations of themselves as learners, their expectations of the instructors within the program, and their expectations of the L3C program as a whole. Data used in this study came from a single, open-ended question that asked participants to identify their primary motivation for participating in the residential learning community focused on leadership. All 89 students completed the instrument for a response rate of 100%.

This study employed deductive content analysis where data from the open-ended question responses were analyzed according to an existing framework (Patton, 2002), in this case, McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory. "Content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an indirect way, through an analysis of their communications" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 472). Responses to the open-ended question were analyzed according to the three needs within McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory by the researchers. The determination of themes based on previous knowledge, theory, and/or experience, prior to data analysis is an acceptable procedure used in content analysis studies (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). Because the Achievement Motivation Theory (McClelland, 1958, 1961) postulates that most people possess and exhibit a combination of the need for Achievement, the need for Power, and the need for Affiliation, the researchers used these three needs as the themes to code the data. Data from the responses were utilized such that only one of the key themes was found within each unit of data (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). The researchers coded both the manifest content and the latent content of each unit of data (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009). To ensure consistency of the codes, the three members of the research team coded the responses collectively.

According to Fraenkel and Wallen, there are two common methods of interpreting content analysis data: the use of frequencies and the percentage and/or proportion of particular occurrences to total occurrences and the use of codes and themes to help organize the content and arrive at a narrative description of the findings. This study employed both methods. Representative quotes from participants written in their own words are included in the findings. The researchers, as human instruments in the study, employed prolonged engagement and persistent observation as strategies to enhance the credibility of the findings (Erlandson et al., 1993; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) noted that, "if prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth" (p. 304).

Results

Content analysis of the responses revealed incoming freshmen students were motivated to participate in the L3C primarily because of the need for Achievement and the need for Affiliation. While all three needs were detected in the student comments, the need for Power was not as pervasive in the comments as the need for Achievement and the need for Affiliation.

The need for Achievement was evident in the statements written by the students. Within this need, common phrases included wanting to gain leadership skills, expand leadership abilities, and to learn how to become a better leader. Student comments demonstrating the need for Achievement are included:

- I wanted to further myself in as a leader in all aspects of my life, but also because I plan on being a teacher and want to be as affective a leader as possible. (87)
- My primary motivation was improving my leadership skills which I believe are essential in my life. (12)
- I also wanted to enhance my leadership abilities. (82)
- I wanted to challenge myself as a person – step outside my comfort zone and better understand what it takes to be a good leader. (89)
- To further and better my leadership skills. (30)

Forty of the 89 students (44.94%) demonstrated the Need for Achievement in their responses.

The need for Affiliation was also often identified within the statements. Within this need, phrases such as students' desire to meet people, establish friendships, and develop a sense of community were common. Student comments demonstrating the need for Affiliation are included:

- My primary motivation for joining the L3C was so I could be a part of a close-knit community my first year of college. (13)
- I thought be a good way to meet fellow freshmen and grow good relationships with them. (65)
- The Leadership Learning Community sounded like a close-knit family, and what I really needed to feel safer at such a big university was people who had things in common with me. (55)
- One of the primary reasons was that being a part of L3C would help facilitate my networks as I begin college life. Along with having people who I can depend on if I fall short on anything, (59)
- I wanted to have a smaller community of people that I could get close to in such a huge university. (66)

Thirty-nine of the 89 students (43.82%) demonstrated the need for Affiliation in their responses.

The need for Power was less evident in the responses to the open-ended question. Students who expressed the need for Power included in their responses the desire to serve in leadership roles or positions.

- I have always been involved and loved leadership positions. The reason for joining L3C is to become active in leadership roles and events my first year at Texas A&M. (4)
- I was a big fish in a little pond in high school, so I felt that joining the L3C would give me leadership roles during my first year at TAMU. I felt that it would also help give me an instant group once I arrived on campus. (10)
- I want to learn how to be a better leader and be able to organize people in a productive way without breeding contempt. (29)

Only eight of the 89 students (8.99%) demonstrated the need for Power in their responses.

Conclusions and Discussion

By analyzing student comments from an open-ended question, the researchers were able to conclude that incoming first-year students were motivated to participate in a voluntary, residential leadership learning community based on the three needs identified by McClelland (1958, 1961), primarily the need for Achievement and the need for Affiliation. Students expressed their needs to make new friends and to develop leadership knowledge, skills, and abilities. Because the words living, community, and leadership are all in the title of the program, it is possible that the initial question asking students what was their primary motive for participating in the Leadership Living Learning Community was leading, therefore prompting students to include affiliation and achievement related comments.

The fact that student comments demonstrated a clear need for both achievement and affiliation supports the work of Minor (1997) and Keeling (2004) who noted the need to view learning more holistically and to integrate academic life with residence life to create transformative learning experiences for students. The demonstrated need for Achievement clearly indicates the need for strong academic programs. Similarly, the demonstrated need for Affiliation clearly indicates the need for strong residential life programs. The benefits for students come when strong academic programs and strong residential programs are integrated. Because almost as many comments reflected the need for Achievement and the need for Affiliation, program coordinators and instructors need to ensure that there is a balance of both academic achievement and social affiliation, thus requiring a continued partnership between the academic department and student affairs.

It is not surprising that this group of students clearly demonstrated the need for Achievement. In essence this finding is consistent with the findings of the studies from the University of Oregon and the Washington Center for Undergraduate Education cited in Gabelnick et al. (1990) which showed students in learning communities had slightly higher expectations about their academic success than freshman who were not enrolled in a learning community. This is also consistent with the findings the Johnson et al. (1998) study cited in Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) which showed that students in learning communities help perceptions of greater academic achievement.

Because for many students, starting college means leaving their friends and families behind, it is not surprising that students entering their first year in college would demonstrate the need for Affiliation. This finding supports findings of the University of Oregon study (cited in Geblenick, et al., 1990) that showed FIG students were a little more anxious than other freshman about making friends. A possible explanation for such a finding can be found in Schlossberg's Transition Theory (Schlossberg, 1981, 1984) which includes a framework for human adaptation to transition. Within the theory there are four stages: situation, self, support, and strategies. The support stage is characterized by finding types of social supports a person has become accustomed to in their previous environment. Social supports can include: "intimate relationships, family units, networks of friends, and institutions and communities" (p. 107).

The need for Power was not as common in the comments of the students. It appeared as though students were more focused on the concept of learning leadership rather than practicing leadership within specific leadership roles. Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, and Osteen (2006) proposed a model of leadership identity development in which individual's progress from Stage One: Awareness, through Exploration/Engagement, Leader Identified, Leadership Differentiated, and Generativity to Stage Six: Integration/Synthesis. Participants in their study entered college in the Leader Identified stage in which students were fully involved in organizations, but were only leaders if they have positional leadership, otherwise they were followers. Perhaps because these students were incoming freshmen they had not yet progressed through their leadership identity development to Stages Four, Five, and Six where they were actively seeking leadership opportunities and exhibit the desire to influence others.

"McClelland's research showed that only about 10 percent of the U.S. population has a 'strong' dominant need for achievement" (Lussier & Achua, 2007, p. 42). While it was beyond the scope of this study to measure the strength of students' need for Achievement, it is interesting to note that almost half of the students (44.94%) in this study made reference to the need for Achievement in their responses.

Implications for Practice and Future Research

Findings from this study showed that students chose to participate in the L3C based primarily on their need for Achievement and their need for Affiliation. Therefore, it is recommended that program coordinators and instructors continually revise the academic component of the program to ensure it remains relevant to the lives of the students while at the same time challenging them to meet high standards of academic success. It is also recommended that program coordinators and instructors ensure that the co-curricular portion of the program and the residence life aspects also remain relevant and clearly emphasize the importance of a sense of belonging. Future marketing efforts within this program should emphasize both the academic and social aspects to ensure students recognize their needs can be met in both achievement and affiliation by participating in the program.

It is recommended that this study be replicated at a smaller institution to assess the need for Affiliation in a similar program. The institution in which the study took place is large, and therefore, perhaps the comments related to the need for Affiliation were more related to the size of the university rather than an actual need for Affiliation.

While it was beyond the scope of this study, the researchers suggest examining the primary motives based on selected demographic characteristics. For example, are men participating in the program more motivated by one of the needs as compared to women?

The need for Power did not appear to be as significant a motive for joining the L3C. It is recommended that further research be conducted to determine if this was in fact due to which stage of the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives, et al., 2006) participants were at when entering college and the L3C.

Had the researchers analyzed the responses from an inductive lens, three additional theme areas would have emerged in addition to the three needs already discussed in this paper: the similarity of the program to their previous experiences, they believe that the program would be fun, or interesting, and the need for on-campus housing. The researchers suggest further research to examine these additional needs.

This study focused solely on explaining the primary motives behind why students wanted to participate in a voluntary, residential leadership learning community using the Acquired Needs Theory (McClelland, 1958, 1961). The comments from students came from an open-ended question that students answered at the very beginning of the program. It is recommended that a future study address whether or not these needs were met.

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