

THE STUDENT ASSESSMENT FELLOWS PROGRAM: Elevating the Student Role in Academic Assessment

Abstract

Over the past decade, a growing number of institutions of higher education have added leadership studies as a formal academic program of study. In many instances, however, students have not been included as partners or stakeholders in the design and delivery of leadership education, and student motivation and retention have subsequently suffered (O'Donovan, Rust, & Price, 2016). This application brief describes a new program, Student Assessment Fellows, which aimed to address these concerns by involving a small group of students in several capacities during the reshaping of a university's leadership program. Through this program, students learned basic tenets of leadership pedagogy and educational program assessment and used both skill sets to author a proposal to restructure the existing academic program. This article reviews the development and design of the program, recommendations from the first cohort, and recommendations for other colleges and universities looking to increase student involvement in educational assessment processes.

Introduction

Leadership education is a rapidly growing field in higher education with over 2,000 programs listed in the International Leadership Association's 2019 program directory (<http://www.ila-net.org/Resources/LPD/index.htm>). Program formats vary widely from traditional face-to-face courses to entirely online courses and from a specified cohort model, where membership in the learning community is defined upon matriculation, to an open major and/or minor model, where membership is defined solely by enrollment in a course or program of study (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). Leadership educators, administrators, students, and other stakeholders in these programs share common goals: providing rigorous course content taught by engaging instructors, constructing opportunities and support for students to apply knowledge gained in meaningful ways, and teaching

adjacent skills such as critical thinking and knowledge evaluation that will serve students well in future career and leadership settings (McLean, 2018). In contrast, the equally important objective of providing accurate and useful feedback about pedagogy, learning, and the program as a whole is often considered to be a goal of educators and administrators only. As a result, students may come to view assessment as a dreaded and unknowable process handed down by those in power (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2008; O'Donovan, Rust, & Price, 2016). Ensuing feelings of powerlessness in students can result in multiple negative outcomes such as confusion (Marziliano, LaPan-Dennis, Zito, & Gillespie, 2015; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004), failure to engage with material (Price, Handley, Millar, & O'Donovan, 2010), and a narrow focus on the grade received, to the detriment of learning (Falchikov, 2003; Taras, 2002).

At our university, student disengagement and frustration with the leadership studies program manifested as general dissatisfaction, reported in periodic anonymous surveys, and a high rate of attrition (30-40%) in the leadership program. This low retention rate existed despite students receiving a financial scholarship stipend each semester for participation. These undesirable outcomes presented a rare opportunity for administration and faculty to reshape the leadership studies program into an explicitly student-centered academic unit, incorporating student priorities and feedback as part of ongoing program assessment and refinement.

Review of Related Literature

Institutions of higher learning serve many purposes beyond the stated goal of providing required components for a specific degree. While degree preparation is one important aim, undergraduate students also need many other skills to be successful in future careers, e.g., communication, critical thinking, construction of knowledge, and evaluation of performance (Chikeleze, Johnson, & Gibson, 2018; O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2008; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2016). Ongoing evaluation and assessment help to ensure that each unit and the university as a whole are meeting field-based and skill-based goals and responding to changes as needed (Marziliano et al., 2015). Continuous assessment of program aims and goals has therefore become a central feature of higher education. Unfortunately, though, this new focus has not always included the full range of stakeholders. Students are typically aware of the standards for individual performance in a course, are taught the relevant terminology and concepts to understand and meet these standards, and may even participate in the creation of those standards via a collectively developed rubric or other joint venture with the instructor (DeLuca, Chapman-Chin, LaPointe-McEwan, & Klinger, 2018). However, students are rarely asked to be explicit partners in the

development of assessment policies and procedures at the programmatic or institutional level in this same way (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2004, 2008). Yet, for students to fully understand and be able to meet assessment standards of their discipline, they must participate as partners at all levels of the assessment process (McDowell & Sambell, 1999; O'Donovan, Rust, & Price, 2016). Full student participation is therefore essential in binding together a thriving learning community that includes engaged and thoughtful students with a strong sense of academic ownership (Davies, 2009).

Regrettably, this type of coherent and active learning community is only a fond ideal for many if not most academic units. In a typical academic setting, administrators and program faculty make independent decisions for the program, likely assuming that "students are not sufficiently knowledgeable or informed for their views to be taken into account in determining the purposes of assessment or how well these are achieved" (McDowell & Sambell, 1999, p.110). In the majority of cases, this assumption is likely true. Students are often treated as simply subjects of assessment, respondents to surveys and producers of work which can then be compared to assessment standards developed by one or more individuals who are not students. Students are not provided with the skills or information they would need to understand why programmatic decisions are made or to make sense of the data upon which those decisions are based. Predictably, assessment decisions would appear to be arbitrary and potentially antagonistic to student interests and concerns. This model does not help students to experience any ownership of the program or curriculum and does not encourage students to value assessment as a positive tool for improvement (Marziliano et al., 2015). If educators want to improve student involvement and commitment, there is a clear need for greater transparency and inclusion in assessment processes in individual

and group formats (Barge & Fairhurst, 2008; Braun, Nazlic, Weisweiler, Pawlowska, Peus, & Frey, 2009; Rust, Price, & O'Donovan, 2003).

At our university, previous student feedback related to the leadership program was collected via online surveys using both Likert-scale and open-ended questions as well as teaching evaluations and academic advising worksheets. Analysis of these data revealed that students felt there were too many program requirements without clear real-world applications. They were unclear as to why specific assessment pieces were necessary and felt trapped in a program that required students to “check the box” for several tasks that were perceived as arbitrary and unnecessary for leadership study or success. Disengaged and disheartened students are not likely to remain enrolled and over the course of a few years (and a few program directors), we saw a large group of these students disengage from the program and their peers. This resulted in a weak sense of bonding or community within the remaining enrolled students and undermined the program structure overall.

As the Leadership Program faculty and staff discussed this feedback and outlined components of potential change, changes to assessment processes emerged as a common theme. What if, instead of feeling irrelevant, students were explicitly made important and equal partners in assessment? Assessment engagement could serve as the first step in our larger goal of involving students in leadership education as equal stakeholders and partners. While all enrolled students are technically stakeholders in an academic program, students are often uncomfortable with the idea and/or the experience of being involved in the assessment or evaluation of that program (Falchikov, 2003; Price, Rust, O'Donovan, Hindley, & Bryant, 2012). Creating a formal structure for student involvement in assessment, one that continuously included student voices and representation, seemed to be a promising way to dispel that discomfort and more effectively increase student buy-in and engagement in the program as a whole (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, & Brown, 2014; Barge & Fairhurst, 2008). In this model, “all stakeholders [would be]

involved in an accessible, ongoing, and transparent cycle of education and process improvement” and information about the development and justification of assessment processes could be more easily disseminated (Marziliano et al., 2015, p.6). Engaging students in multiple levels of the assessment process would likely also improve overall student performance (Rust et al. 2003) and help them to produce higher-quality work that meets specific standards (O'Donovan, Price, & Rust, 2008; Price, Rust, O'Donovan, Hindley, & Bryant, 2012). Furthermore, changing the perception of assessment from a top-down process to a collaborative, community-wide project would help to promote the conceptualization of the academic program as a vibrant and coherent learning community, as opposed to a collection of siloed individuals dragging themselves through a checklist. Within this academic community, students would learn about overarching processes (e.g., cyclical assessment and continuous improvement) rather than isolated events (e.g., fill out a mentoring worksheet) and situate specific tasks within a larger conceptual design (O'Donovan et al., 2008). Students would also create and use “authentic assessments” (Ashford-Rowe, Herrington, & Brown, 2014) that are challenging, collaborative, and end with a work product. Involving students in assessment would serve as the foundation of improving program relevance and student engagement and would also function as an ongoing tool to improve the program iteratively over time.

With this new approach in mind, the administration and faculty turned our attention to the specifics of how to approach these lofty aims. In order to include students as true partners in effective assessment planning, implementation, review, and decision-making, it became clear that more knowledge in this area would be required for at least a subset of students. Consequently, the decision was made to create a new program to train a small group of student representatives in current best practices in academic assessment. Those students would then serve as liaisons with the larger group of enrolled students to explain relevant information, host discussions,

and mentor other interested students. Ideally, after the first few cohorts, the leadership studies program would always have at least a few students per year well-versed in assessment procedures, and those students could serve as knowledgeable partners in continuous assessment and program modification.

The Student Assessment Fellows Program

Pedagogical Components. Prior to the implementation of the Student Assessment Fellows program, the leadership curriculum was primarily delivered through a small number of leadership courses and a stipend-based extracurricular leadership program. The extracurricular program was funded through an outside organization with its own set of admission and program requirements and was facilitated through the university. This stipend-based program existed prior to the launch of a formal Leadership Studies academic program through the university and was for several years the only option for the study of leadership that resulted in official recognition. Over a period of several years, retention in the extracurricular stipend-based program declined significantly to 60-70% and initial enrollment also declined. However, student interest in leadership education via the newer course offerings remained high. Student feedback revealed that individuals were frustrated with the extra demands of the stipend-based program but concurrently expressed a desire to study leadership in a way that fit more neatly into degree program and major/minor requirements, rather than imposing extra demands. This presented the occasion to offer a more innovative and updated Leadership Studies program which incorporated prior research on best-practice pedagogy and assessment in the study of leadership, opened the door for significant student involvement, and provided a salient opportunity to “bring leadership education to life.”

The Student Assessment Fellows (SAF) program was designed to involve current leadership education students (both course-enrolled and extracurricular-

program-enrolled) in the design and development of sustainable and fluid assessment plans and procedures for the new leadership program, intended to serve over 150 undergraduate students. As part of a commitment to effective leadership education, student involvement was a valued component of developing the new plan. Students would be explicitly involved in the creation of a dynamic assessment plan that allowed for flexibility to ensure strong student enrollment and retention within Leadership Studies programs, while concurrently providing meaningful learning opportunities for undergraduate students to develop as leaders in the critical area of assessment.

Design and Delivery Components. The Student Assessment Fellows program was created via an institutional grant awarded to the Leadership Studies program. Students were recruited through Leadership Studies courses and the email listserv for the existing extracurricular program. Faculty also promoted the program at a mandatory meeting for all Leadership Studies students. Requirements for the Fellows program included a 3.0 GPA, a minimum of sophomore status, and “an interest in the ‘why’ and ‘how’ instead of just the ‘what.’” From the pool of interested students, three students were ultimately selected to serve as the first cohort of Student Assessment Fellows (SAFs). Each student received a stipend of \$200 per semester for their work and were also individually recognized at the annual program banquet.

Because the Student Assessment Fellows program was new, no previous curriculum existed; therefore, this author created the program curriculum. The general tenets were based in the pedagogy of the Leadership Studies program as well as foundational concepts in program assessment and evaluation. The final curriculum covered foundational skills and concepts of organizational leadership theory, leadership assessment, data collection and analysis, program evaluation, community engagement, and an emphasis on integrating these skills into social justice activism. In the fall semester, students initially attended a one-day introductory workshop on educational program research and assessment to

establish a baseline of knowledge and skill. Students then attended monthly two-hour workshops from September through January. These workshops, taught by the Leadership Studies Program Director and this writer, focused on aspects of program development and assessment as well as the value pillars of the Leadership Studies program: social justice and inclusion, experiential learning, and community engagement.

In the spring semester, Student Assessment Fellows and program staff visited leadership programs at other universities in the area. We engaged in tours and interviewed program faculty, staff, students, and alumni using a structured interview that the cohort developed with support from professional staff. In these visits, students were able to explore a wide variety of models of effective leadership education and talked with students and faculty about a range of successful practices in teaching, learning, and assessment. After these visits, the Fellows met as a group to discuss their findings and explore common themes among interviewees, programs, and institutions. The Fellows then used the data they collected and the themes they identified to write recommendations for changes to the Leadership Studies program.

Initial Outcomes. Student recommendations from this project spanned a wide range of concerns, a select few of which are enumerated here.

Physical space. The Fellows emphatically endorsed the creation of a lounge space in the Leadership Studies office for leadership students to spend time together and create/maintain a bonded cohort. This feeling of community was a common refrain at other institutions and was lacking in the Leadership Studies program's incarnation at the time. The Fellows felt strongly that a literal place to create community would improve student relationships and cohesion within the program.

Internships. The Fellows called for the

development of consistent and relevant internship opportunities in applied leadership skills. While some placements were available within the university, the Fellows noted that many students were interested in leadership in other contexts (e.g., business or health settings) and had not been able to apply their skills in a more relevant setting. They noted concern among students about the potential negative impact of this experience deficit. With this in mind, the Fellows advocated for the creation of a database of potential internship placements for students in a variety of settings. Students looking for a position could access this database to find opportunities that matched their interests and career trajectory and could also review a history of prior interns available to provide information and feedback about the site.

Senior project. Third, the Fellows recommended the addition of a "senior project" component to the Leadership Studies program to replace the current capstone course. Instead of a purely academic review of concepts learned, the students envisioned the senior capstone as an experiential course in leadership with a weekly meeting for discussion and support. Students would design and propose a project to the faculty in the junior year and complete the project in the senior year. The topic, location, and design of the project would be left to the student's discretion, but must involve specific components and practices of leadership and assessment such as project concept and design, creating and maintaining partnerships with individuals and organizations, managing participants, creating and following project budgets, analyzing results, and presenting results to stakeholders.

These projects would provide increased autonomy for student leaders to conceptualize and execute individual projects and provide real-life experience in important components of leadership. This partnership between Leadership Studies students would again contribute to a cohesive program identity as well as provide opportunities for first- and second-year students to become involved in the larger community in a meaningful way. Additionally, non-senior students could get hands-on experience through assisting with successful senior projects and ideally increase their own sense of competence and preparedness for their own senior project. In this way, the program would become a self-sustaining incubator for innovation in leadership and effective community engagement, all with minimal faculty involvement and a strong sense of student stewardship. The Fellows also recommended that funding be available for students conducting the senior project in order to support seniors in creating these larger-scale projects that could involve other students.

The Fellows began to draft two extensive documents covering their findings and recommendations for program assessment and design. Furthermore, the students will organize their findings on effective leadership programs and prepare to share those findings with other stakeholders at the program and university levels, as well as larger learning communities via presenting at a leadership conference.

Discussion: Reflections and Recommendations

The Student Assessment Fellows program was an overwhelmingly positive experience for all involved. The teaching faculty got the opportunity to work with a small group of motivated students and provide

instruction in program assessment, an integral part of providing quality education programs. The Fellows provided invaluable feedback on the structure and delivery of the current program and frequently brought up concerns or suggestions that were different than those identified by the faculty. This perspective was both needed and useful for a successful program redesign. Additionally, the inclusion of students in the team that visited other leadership programs expanded conversations; the students were able to speak with their peers in a nonevaluative manner, yielding responses that were perhaps different from those otherwise obtained in faculty-facilitated conversations.

The wide variety of responses to the cohort's structured interview instrument provided a set of data which served as the foundation for conversations among students, faculty, program staff, and the dean of the program's college. These conversations ranged across topics such as pedagogy, physical space, funding for new initiatives, community engagement, and student recruitment. While most changes will take time to implement, one immediate response to the Fellows' recommendations was the creation of a student lounge in the Leadership Studies office, replete with comfortable furniture and computers for student use. This space has quickly become a central hub for students during the work day and also serves as a meeting space for study groups in the evening. Additionally, two student employees have started to build the desired internship database, entering information for current student experiences as well as internship placements that may be available through program alumni and/or their current employers.

As the curriculum and procedures for the program are now fully written and edited, the process with future cohorts of Fellows will likely be much more streamlined. Retention rates within the Leadership Studies minor are expected to rise with the introduction of trained Student Assessment Fellows to serve as program liaisons and ambassadors. The students involved described increasing feelings of competence in assessment over the course of the Fellows year and a much stronger sense of ownership

in the Leadership Studies program. Fellows can now explain the structure and function of program requirements as well as the reasoning behind student-endorsed changes, supplementing information received from faculty. One student characterized herself as a “pioneer” in developing the updated policies and curriculum, noting that “even though I won’t be around for a lot of this, other students will, and they’ll know we did it. Students set this up.” Other students expressed similar sentiments related to empowerment, ownership, and a reimagined view of students as active and important stakeholders in the program.

The Leadership Studies program as a whole benefited greatly from the involvement of well-trained and enthusiastic Fellows in the program redesign process. The Fellows were carefully chosen based on specific attributes which served them well in the training program; we prioritized attitude and openness over purely academic metrics. It is recommended that other programs looking to start a similar program consider student applications based on student enthusiasm, academic performance, professor recommendation, and interpersonal skills rather than class standing or number of leadership courses completed.

Funding from an institutional grant provided refreshments for training seminars, travel expenses for campus visits, and a small stipend for each student, disbursed in two installments across semesters. The inclusion of a small stipend likely stirred interest in the program and provided additional incentive for students to stay actively involved with the program over the course of an entire academic year. Institutional or outside grant funding would likely also be helpful to achieve similar levels of involvement from students at other colleges and universities.

The development and pilot of this program was an intensive project, but the return on investment has so far been excellent. The excitement of the Student Assessment Fellows has spread to other Leadership Studies students and interest in the SAF program has already increased. Ideally, a new group of Student

Assessment Fellows will be trained each year and create a strong group of engaged, motivated students to serve as student representatives in program leadership. These students will function as mentors and liaisons with peers and continue to support the redesigned Leadership Studies program in striving to maintain a high-quality, relevant academic program with a strong focus on social justice and active learning and an energetic, dedicated student body.

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