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Assessing Reasons for Involvement in Student Leadership Activities

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the factors that either prompt or prevent undergraduate student participation in leadership development activities. A survey including 35 items was created. The survey was rated by experts for construct validity. Based on expert ratings, 17 items were retained. Internal reliability of the items was .87. Both a factor analysis and a qualitative analysis of the items indicated a single factor for student involvement centered on personal development. An analysis of demographic variables indicated that students planning to attend graduate school were more favorable toward involvement in student leadership activities. Implications for improving participation in student leadership activities are discussed.

Keywords: student activities, leadership development, participation

Assessing Reasons for Involvement in Student Leadership Activities

Student leadership activities are generally considered to be positive experiences that enhance one's educational experience (Astin, 1999). Although there is considerable research on leadership, relatively little is known about what prompts student engagement in leadership activities. The purpose of this study was to develop an instrument to examine the reasons why students choose to participate in student leadership activities and to obtain initial data regarding participation in those activities.

For the purpose of this study, student leadership activities were defined as those institutionally organized activities that are specifically designed to move a student toward a greater understanding of his or her leadership potential. It is important to note that this study did not examine the value that participation in student leadership activities affords college students. Existing research shows that participation in leadership activities enhances academic and life skills development as well as civic responsibility among students (Astin & Sax, 1998; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001). However, Astin (1999) suggests that the degree to which students benefit from leadership activities is directly related to their investment in those activities. Therefore, it is important to understand the reasons why students either engage in or avoid leadership activities.

Researchers have suggested at least two reasons why students might choose to avoid leadership activities, both of which are based on the idea of disengagement. First, students may perceive college as a means to an end. Labaree (1997) argued that students frequently look at college as a way to earn the credentials they need to obtain a job or move on to graduate school while putting forth minimal effort. Furthermore, Flacks and Thomas (1998) suggested that this type of disengagement inhibits students from seeing the connection between their academic work and potential opportunities in the future. Second, students may simply go through the motions of being in school. Marchese (1998) discussed the concept of student disengagement from the perspective that students view college and university as representing a system they have learned and navigated previously in high school. As a result, students follow the rules of being a student without being fully invested in the process. Consequently,

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these negative student attitudes may prevent students from seeing the value and benefits of student leadership activities and deter them from participating in these activities.

Instead of being fully engaged in course and campus activities, students in the current culture appear to look for the immediate relevance of activities. Frymier and Shulman (1999) reported that before taking the time to read, write, think, or act, students want to know an answer to the age-old question, "what's in it for me?". Therefore, the perceived relevance of an activity, both in and out of the classroom, impacts one's willingness to participate in the activity. Although the relevance can be made explicit, modeling also influences perceived relevance. For instance, Astin (1999) found that faculty who exhibit a focus on social change, volunteerism, and service learning positively influence their students' focus on social involvement (also Lips, 2000). Therefore, a survey was developed in the present study to examine student engagement, relevance, and positive role modeling of leadership activities.

Method
Participants
A random sample of 700 undergraduates was sent a leadership-related survey through campus mail. There was a five-dollar incentive for completing the survey. The survey was completed by 166 students (23.71% response rate). Of those completing the survey, approximately 74 percent were female. The sample was relatively evenly distributed across levels of class standing with 24 percent freshmen, 19 percent sophomores, 30 percent juniors, and 27 percent seniors.

Instrument
A survey was designed to examine reasons for student involvement in leadership activities. The survey consisted of 35 items using a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree (items are available online at http://www.georgefox.edu/academics/assessment/leadership.html). Survey items were constructed by an expert with six years of experience in Student Life. After the items were created, the survey was given to two additional experts in Student Life with four and 15 years of experience working directly with undergraduates in leadership-related activities. These experts were asked to rate how important they felt each item was to student involvement in leadership activities using a four-point Likert scale (strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree). The experts rated 17 of the items as either agree or strongly agree. The remaining 18 items had at least one negative rating. Therefore, only the 17 positively rated items were retained. Thirteen of the 17 items received identical ratings by the experts.

Reliability of the survey was also determined. Cronbach's alpha (.87) was calculated based on the 156 respondents in the current study (10 were excluded due to incomplete surveys). Thus, the survey demonstrated strong internal reliability.

Procedure
Students received the survey through campus mail. They were asked to complete the survey and return it to the researchers. Upon returning the completed survey, respondents received their five-dollar incentive. Apart from the demographic questions included in the survey, no identifying information was recorded.

Results

Survey Construction

To further exam the psychometric properties of the survey, each item was correlated with the total score. All items were significantly correlated with the total scores with correlation coefficients ranging from .40 to .71. The correlations suggest that each item uniquely contributes to the total score. However, the items most related to leadership activity include "My own personal interest in leadership encourages me to participate in leadership development activities" (r = .71), "University employees have instilled within me the importance of participating in leadership development activities" (r = .68), "My sense of calling or purpose encourages me to participate in leadership development activities" (r = .67), and "A personal desire to develop my leadership gifts and abilities encourages me to participate in leadership development activities" (r =.67). In addition, a factor analysis was conducted to obtain a preliminary indication of whether or not reasons for participating in leadership activities are associated with a unitary factor or multiple factors. Results indicate that the items load onto a single factor. In addition to the factor analysis, the authors categorized each item as being related to the importance of leadership or the relevance of leadership with importance addressing personal development and relevance addressing the value of leadership or expectation of influencing others in the future. An examination of the items showed that all of the items retained dealt with the importance of leadership for personal development. This qualitative analysis is consistent with the factor analysis and suggests that students who view leadership activities as opportunities for personal development are more likely to participate in leadership activities.

Survey Results

Based on the rating scale, the total score for the leadership survey ranged from 17 to 68. Respondents in this study had total scores ranging from 25 to 67. The mean total score was 48.72 (SD = 6.83). Scores were normally distributed (Sk = -.07).

Total leadership scores were compared across several demographic variables to determine potential differences in leadership activity. A Bonferroni correction was used to account for multiple comparisons. No differences were found for age, year (e.g., freshman, sophomore), gender, living on or off campus, working off campus, or the percentage of college expenses funded by parents or family. Furthermore, educational levels of the mother and father were not related to the overall leadership score. Whether or not students planed on attending graduate school, however, did produce differences on total scores (t(157) = 2.90, p = .004) with students desiring to attend graduate school (M = 48.98, SD = 6.13) scoring higher than students who were not planning on attending graduate school (M = 46.72, SD = 7.64).

Discussion

A survey instrument was developed to investigate reasons why students choose to engage and not engage in student leadership development activities. Thirty-five items were written by a student life expert. The items were then rated by two additional experts. As a result of this process, 17 items were identified as being most related to leadership involvement. Internal reliability of the 17 items was .87. A factor analysis suggested a unitary factor structure for involvement in student leadership development activities. A qualitative analysis of the items further suggested that the 17 items focus on the importance of leadership to personal development. Together, these findings indicate that the survey developed and used in this study is a reliable and valid instrument for examining the reasons that motivate students to participate in leadership activities.

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Among the demographic variables examined in this study, only the intention to attend graduate school led to a greater interest in leadership opportunities. This finding suggests that students with long-term academic (and career) goals may be more motivated to engage in activities to achieve these goals. Participation in college student leadership development activities may be one such avenue. Conversely, students who come to college with less certainty of their long-term goals may not choose to participate in student leadership development activities because those activities are perceived as having little relevance or utility. Unfortunately, the demographic questionnaire only contained items regarding advanced degrees and not specific career goals that do not require an advanced degree. If students are using student leadership activities as means to achieve a particular goal (e.g., graduate school), then students with clear career aspirations should also be more inclined to engage in student leadership activities in order to enhance their learning, skill set, and job application. Therefore, future research regarding reasons for student participation in leadership activities should also examine the degree to which students have specific academic or career goals. If these types of goals influence involvement in student leadership activities, then helping students identify their vocational goals early in their college careers may result in increased involvement in student leadership development activities and encourage students to engage in more goal-directed behaviors while in college.

Additional research with the survey developed in this study should also be conducted on other campuses, particularly at schools of different types (e.g., private vs. public) and sizes (e.g., small vs. large). Findings similar to the present study would suggest that college students, regardless of type and size of the school they are attending, generally look at student leadership activities the same utilitarian way. This could be tied to generational or cultural factors and would further suggest that leadership programs that engage students could be implemented across institutions following similar strategies. However, findings different from the present study would suggest that students at different schools view involvement in student leadership activities in differently. Such a finding would indicate that strategies for involving students in leadership activities, and perhaps the types of leadership activities made available, need to be tailored to the type and size of the institution.

Contributors

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