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Impact of a Student Leadership Experience on the Development of Creativity in Undergraduate Students

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a leadership experience on the development of creativity in undergraduate students in order to help student affairs professionals, faculty, and administrators better understand how they can develop creativity in their students. A phenomenological study was conducted on students who held a leadership position as a Resident Assistant or cabinet member of a student organization on the campus of a small institution in the Midwestern United States. The study consisted of an open-ended survey and semi-structured interviews. Key findings from this study include insight into various aspects of students' experiences in leadership including event planning, supervisors, collaboration, impact on communication, looking past failure, incorporation of interests into their roles, redefining creativity through their roles, and the students' creative self-efficacy. These findings additionally provide support for the idea that a leadership experience is an effective method for teaching creativity to undergraduate students.

Introduction

Society often views creativity as some abstract, ethereal mantle which graces certain individuals, bestowing upon them the ability to be artistically inclined (McNiff, 1998). Current research, however, suggests otherwise. Within the past thirty years, scholars across the fields of social sciences and education have become increasingly intrigued with the subject of creativity, examining what traits or dispositions are present in creative individuals, the factors contributing to creativity, and methodologies for its development. Considering the complexity of challenges faced by society, it is important for institutions of higher education to develop individuals who are able to find creative solutions from multidisciplinary perspectives (Berrett, 2013).

Fortunately, the tools utilized by creative individuals are often ideal developmental outcomes for those who are involved in student leadership. Despite these potential connections between student leadership and creativity, little to no research exists on the topic. This study sought to examine these potential connections to help student development professionals understand how to develop creativity in their student leaders.

Working Definitions and Purpose Statement

Because of the variety in approaches to creativity, this study utilized the following working definition: creativity is the ability to make connections within a single field or across multiple fields of knowledge to create a novel concept or product. Student leadership is also a broad topic within the realm of higher education, so this study used the following working definition: student leadership refers to any position in which a student is developed in order to cultivate characteristics indicative of effective leaders. Although Astin and Astin (1996) argued leadership is a process rather than a position, this study discussed leadership in this study as a role since the students examined were in designated leadership positions.

The purpose of this study was to examine if a student leadership experience fosters traits associated with creative individuals and if so, the extent and manner in which those traits are being developed. Two research questions guided the study:

1. Is creativity a developmental outcome of a student leadership experience?
2. What traits indicative of creative individuals are being developed in student leaders and how are these traits being developed?

Literature Review

Creativity

The Nature of Creativity. The subject of creativity is difficult to define concretely. Kandiko (2012) affirmed this idea, stating, “creativity research is so broad and contested in part because it is conceptualised from several disciplinary angles” (p. 192). Despite the broad nature of the subject, research on creativity provides an image of not artistic ability, but the creation of new or novel thinking (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Hulme, Thomas, & DeLaRosby, 2014; Runco, 2003; Treffinger, Young, Selby, & Shepardson, 2002).

In the literature, creativity is often described utilizing lists of characteristics indicative of creative individuals. Some of these characteristics include curiosity (Hulme et al., 2014; Runco, 2007), engagement with a broad range of fields (Lucas, Claxton, & Spencer, 2014; Runco, 2007), comfort with entering into ambiguous or uncertain situations (Lucas et al., 2014; Runco 2007), collaboration (Lucas et al. 2014), and creative self-efficacy—the idea that an individual is creative (Hulme et al., 2014; Runco 2007). In addition, Hulme et al. (2014) described creativity as a process to be undertaken and proposed a framework for creative ideation (pp. 17-20). The emphasis in this method was on the final step in which ideas are prototyped, refined, and implemented in order to put the creative output to use. Between the traits described above and the process described by Hulme et al. (2014), the literature on creativity rejects the notion that creative ability is reserved for the artistically gifted.

The Development of Creativity. After determining the nature of creativity comes the challenge of developing it in university students. Fortunately for colleges, “the fact that Creativity is largely intentional supports the notion that ‘we can do something about creativity.’ It is not fixed at birth, nor necessarily lost in midlife or late adulthood” (Runco, 2007, p. 411). This concept that creativity is about developing traits or methods is particularly good news in light of the TED talk by Robinson (2006), arguing the modern school system is “educating people out of their creative capacities.”

Hulme et al. (2014) proposed the importance of creativity ecosystems as a method for developing creative characteristics and supporting creative methodology. They proposed generating such environments through reengineering campus organizational structures and organizing learning experiences to develop creative characteristics (Hulme et al.,

2014, pp. 20-21). Additionally, the literature often identifies supervisors and educators as critical components to providing a space in which students can develop in their creative potential (Alencar, Fleith, & Pereira, 2017; Baillie, 2006; Jackson & Sinclair, 2006).

Leadership Development in College Students

One of the fundamental theories in understanding how leadership and other qualities are developed in students is Astin's involvement theory (1984), suggesting students who are involved on campus have greater developmental and learning outcomes. Utilizing Astin (1984), Patterson (2012) concluded involvement in organizations and clubs was an influential factor in developing leadership, particularly in interdisciplinary organizations (p. 7). Additionally, Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001) found those who participated in leadership activities experienced greater developmental outcomes than non-participants and experiences in leadership education and training were significant contributing factors to such development.

In 1996, Astin and Astin published their social change model of leadership development, arguing leadership was primarily concerned with societal change and is a process, collaborative, and value-based (p. 10). Astin and Astin (1996) categorized the values at the level of the individual, group, or community. At the individual level were consciousness of self, congruence of behavior, and commitment. Group values were collaboration, common purpose, and the ability to engage in controversy with civility. Finally, the community and societal value was citizenship. These values were all centered around the idea of change, the central hub of the model (Astin & Astin, 1996, p. 21).

Intersections between Creativity and Student Leadership

Many points of similarity exist between creativity and student leadership in the university. The first such area where a similarity exists is in collaboration, which Astin and Astin (1996) described as one of the seven values of their social change model of student leadership. Similarly, Lucas, Claxton, and Spencer (2014) included a collaborative disposition as one of the five dimensions in their model of creativity. A second aspect of convergence between creativity and student leadership is in engagement within a broad range of fields. Patterson (2012) observed students were more developed in their leadership capacities when involved in interdisciplinary organizations while Lucas et al. (2014) described the ability to make connections as an aspect of an imaginative disposition. Additionally, Runco (2007) included the presence of a wide

range of interests as an indicative characteristic of a creative individual. The third area of commonality in leadership and creativity is the ability to enter into uncertain or complex situations. Cress et al. (2001) used the ability to deal with complexity, uncertainty, and ambiguity and willingness to take risks as categories for measuring students' leadership ability. Runco (2007) also included each of these factors in his traits of creative individuals.

Ultimately, a myriad of characteristics overlap between leadership development in students and creative individuals. Ideally, if students are given the opportunity to be creative, they should be developing and learning more due to their involvement in creative practice, per Astin (1984). Unfortunately, little to no research exists examining if students involved in leadership are developing other creative capabilities in addition to the traits mentioned above.

Method

Little research has been conducted on this topic, so a qualitative study was deemed most appropriate to explore this subject. Since this study examined students' experiences and how creativity is being developed through such occurrences, a phenomenological was the most fitting design-type (Creswell, 2013). Additionally, this study was highly exploratory, so bracketing out the researcher's thoughts and experiences with the phenomenon would have inhibited drawing comprehensive conclusions, therefore a hermeneutical approach was utilized (van Manen, 1990).

Participants and Procedures

Participants for this study were students who held a position as Resident Assistant (RA) or as a member of a cabinet under the student organizations office at a private, faith-based, liberal-arts university in the Midwest. These groups were purposefully selected, as they would be the most likely to develop the traits of interest due to the time and energy commitments inherent in their roles. After obtaining a list of the names of student leaders and asking the directors of residence life and student programs to encourage their students to participate, the researcher sent out an online survey. The survey inquired how or to what extent traits associated with creativity were being developed through their leadership experiences (ie. collaboration, broad interests, affinity toward complexity, and risk tolerance). In order to increase the response rate, the

researcher offered a drawing for a \$10 gift card to the campus coffee shop as incentive.

Next, the researcher analyzed the surveys and eight students who included responses indicating a unique perspective on one or more of the traits were contacted, provided they indicated interest in being interviewed. The interview protocol sought to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how students developed the indicated traits through their leadership experiences. Additionally, the interview protocol inquired how participants defined creativity and if their leadership experience had any impact on their thinking concerning creativity as a whole. Interviews were recorded and then transcribed so the researcher could analyze the data.

Analysis and Validity

After collecting the data, the researcher read through the data and coded it according to common key words and phrases. After the coding process, the researcher grouped codes into themes, and interpretation began (Creswell, 2013). To ensure the validity of the data, the researcher utilized triangulation and member checking (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). These strategies prevented one individual account from providing the sole basis of a reported finding and allowed participants to make corrections to misunderstood responses.

Results

Survey Results

The researcher sent out the survey to 169 students, of which 32 responded. Overall, most responses affirmed leadership positions had given participants opportunities to engage with traits indicative of creative individuals. The largest number of negative responses were to the questions inquiring if the leadership role allowed the participants to develop a broader range of interests and if the role allowed them to test and refine their ideas, with four negative responses per question.

When asked whether their experience helped them to better make connections across multiple fields, participants on average interpreted the question as referring to networking connections rather than connections in information. Thus, the researcher discarded responses demonstrating an obvious misunderstanding of the question. To rectify this error, the researcher asked a similar question with clarified wording in the individual interviews.

Interview Results

Incorporation of Interests into Role. In the interviews, all eight participants discussed incorporating their interests into their leadership positions. One student organization member referred back to her previous experience as an RA and recalled teaching her residents how to knit, while a member of a student organization described showing her cabinets films and attending academic talks to prompt discussion.

Sub-themes: Connection to major and incorporation of class material into role. Throughout the interviews, seven of the eight participants made a connection to their major, six of whom discussed their major in relation to their leadership position. Additionally, four participants mentioned incorporating class information into their roles. One RA described how both her major and specific course information impacted her experience as a leader:

I was having super hard conversations, um, on my wing and I didn't know how to approach them, or I, like, didn't understand why they wouldn't—why they reacted in this way or what they wouldn't open up about this. And I would go to class and literally be, like, “and here's Johari's window, and here's closed information, and here's open information,” and I was, like, “oh my gosh, this is, like, what I've—this is why I can't communicate with these people,” or “this is why this person is upset about this because I responded in this way.”

Sub-theme: New interests due to role. In addition to existing interests, six participants spoke about how their roles fostered new interests. One RA discussed her new interests in other cultures stemming from the relationships she built with Korean and Bahamian residents. Through their experiences, participants indicated they were able to find ways to incorporate interests into their roles and discover new passions as a result of their experiences in leadership.

Event Planning. The second major theme was event planning. All eight participants discussed their role in planning or executing events in their interviews. One male RA stated:

I got to put together an escape room. That was a lot of fun and it was kind of ambiguous because I didn't know how to throw one together and—but I felt like the—taking risks is an idea that has been grown, uh, and fostered in the student development program, um,

and this idea if you have a creative idea that you're not sure if it might go over well, like, take that risk, see how it develops.

Participants discussed how their planning of events also fostered new interests, allowed for collaboration, or allowed them to see themselves as creative individuals.

Impact on Communication. Seven of the eight participants mentioned their experiences impacted how they communicated in some manner. One RA spoke about learning the importance of communication from his predecessors:

...some things were implemented really well, um, like, for instance, like, planning—like, floor emails, like, I didn't know at the time how vital that—that was—how effective that was. But, you know, I just carried on that kind of tradition and it was effective, so I learned from that.

Sub-theme: Creativity in conversation. In the discussion on communication, half of the participants mentioned being creative in conversations. One RA reflected:

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I've definitely learned in this role, like, how do you creatively start a conversation with someone that you've only known—with a freshman that you've only known for five hours of, like, “the only thing that I can see that we have in common is you have jeans on, and I do too.” And, like, how do you start a conversation with this person, uh, like, off of jeans?

Of the four who discussed creativity in conversation, three described it from the perspective of an RA while one recounted the topic from her experience facilitating large-scale conversations on campus in a student organization.

Supervisors. Six of the eight participants also mentioned their supervisor at some point in the interview. Participants spoke about their supervisors' influence on their thinking or how their supervisors allowed for a significant experience. One participant reflected on how her supervisor pushed her and her cabinet to take risks and to innovate with a growth mindset. Others additionally described their supervisors' roles in developing new interests and helping to teach them how to effectively program.

Collaboration. Another common theme in the interviews was an amount

growth

of collaboration in their roles, with six of the eight participants mentioning the idea. Participants mentioned collaborating with other organizations and individuals, building relationships across campus. Some also discussed how collaboration within their organization showed them the value of seeing and utilizing the strengths inherent in their group.

Sub-theme: Going to team for input or support. Among the discussion of collaboration in their leadership positions, four participants mentioned a team of people with whom they could consult for input or support. One RA recounted:

When people say, “hey I want to go out and play volleyball” or “I want to go do more, like, athletic kind of events,” like, I can’t relate on that. And so I had to, like, go to [my co-RAs] and say, “hey, uh, how would you do this? How would you think about implementing this kind of activity?”

Looking Past Failure. The sixth major theme was looking past failure, either real or perceived. One of the six participants who mentioned this theme discussed how he was able to develop a growth mindset from his major and from his time in student programs. This participant further related how he views failure as an “iterative process,” a term derived from his major referring to a cycle of testing an idea or program, failing, and fixing it before trying again.

Redefining Creativity through Role. In their discussion of creativity, all eight participants mentioned some way in which their experiences in leadership influenced their views or definition of creativity. All had different ways of defining creativity but described how their definition, thoughts, or views on creativity changed through an experience or training within their leadership program. These descriptions of creativity often had similar components such as describing creativity as art or music (although not exclusively), creativity involving something new or original, and creativity as uniqueness.

Sub-theme: Creativity as art or music. Of the eight participants, seven mentioned creativity as including art and music. The one participant excluded from this number still mentioned art but discussed how it does not fit within his “paradigm” of creativity. Others mentioned art as being a more traditional idea of what defines creativity or how they at some point used art as a measurement of their own creativity (or lack thereof).

Sub-theme: Creativity as new or original. In their descriptions of creativity, five participants described creativity as being new or original in some

way. One participant stated it as, “making something original, fresh, or new, even just if to yourself, um, and it can be within a specific framework or making a new framework for things to be designed under.” Another said she defined creativity as, “doing something new, um, maybe pushing yourself, um, in an area—something that you haven’t done before or that maybe somebody hasn’t laid out for you to do or you haven’t seen done perhaps.”

Sub-theme: Creativity as unique. Although similar to an idea of something being new or original, four participants discussed creativity as putting a unique, individualized spin on an idea. One participant stated, “it’s not even necessarily creating something, I think it’s engaging with concepts, with ideas, with physical materials in... not necessarily new but in very unique and personal-to-you ways.” Another described creativity as “an individual’s, like, unique way of experiencing,” occurring in a variety of outlets.

Creative Self-Efficacy. The final major theme participants discussed was creative self-efficacy or the idea that one is creative. All eight of the participants stated they thought of themselves as creative. One RA described her view of herself in the following manner:

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I like to do things differently. I like to break molds. I am a little bit of a challenger in that way, if somebody tells me to do something or says I should do something, I’m gonna find the, like, freshest way to do that.

Participants also discussed their views of themselves as creative in relation to unique skillsets, imagination, working within various frameworks, or being creative within their major.

Sub-theme: Role impacting view of self as creative. Seven of the eight participants affirmed their leadership experience had an impact on their creative self-efficacy. Participants often discussed how their views of themselves as creative individuals were impacted as their roles allowed them to see ways that they were creative. Additionally, some mentioned their training specifically discussed creativity, thus broadening their perspectives on what creativity entails. Amongst the participants, one indicated she did not feel like her experience in leadership contributed to her creative self-efficacy as she had always viewed herself as a creative person.

Discussion

The results of this study provide insight into how creativity can be developed through a student leadership position. This study indicated leadership positions put students in spaces where they are able to develop creative skills and then utilize them. Leadership experiences also provided students the opportunities to redefine creativity and see the ways in which they were creative themselves.

Key Findings

Event Planning. Based on participants' responses, event planning was a common way for students to develop their creativity, as it required them to gain comfort in working with ambiguity and complexity, traits mentioned in leadership and creativity literature (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Hulme, Thomas, & DeLaRosby, 2014; Lucas, Claxton, & Spencer, 2014; Runco, 2007). Event planning also provided students the opportunities to incorporate interests into their roles and collaborate with others, in line with Lucas et al. (2014) and Hulme et al. (2014). Through events participants gained beneficial practice in collaboration, engaging with ambiguous circumstances, and the process of prototyping and refining ideas.

Participants also mentioned event planning as a way in which they were able to see themselves as creative. This theme of self-efficacy points back to Runco (2007) and Hume et al. (2014) who included self-efficacy as a trait of creative individuals. Ultimately, event planning provided an opportunity for students to gain experience with creativity and allowed student leaders to see the ways in which they were creative. This experience even caused some participants to develop a newfound creative self-efficacy as they redefined creativity and saw how their skills fit into their new paradigm.

Supervisors. In addition to event planning, the results point to supervisors as an important factor in helping student leaders develop new interests, aiding in the redefinition of creativity, and creating an environment for student leaders to prototype and refine ideas. The participants' frequent mention of supervisors in their responses affirmed the importance of creative mentors as a component of developing creativity in college students, proposed by Hulme et al. (2014) and Alencar, Fleith, and Pereira (2017). Additionally supervisors contributed to creating an environment conducive to creativity, in line with Baillie (2006), Jackson and Sinclair (2006), and Cole, Sugioka, and Yamagata-Lynch (1999), by

providing spaces in which student leaders were able to work together, experiment with new ideas, and see themselves as creative.

Implications for practitioners

The results of this study indicate a leadership experience can provide an effective conduit for the development of creativity in undergraduate students. This finding carries a variety of implications for practices to more effectively foster creativity through leadership positions. Since supervisors were a reoccurring theme, student affairs professionals should be cognizant of how they structure students' leadership experiences to maximize the impact it will have on the development of creativity in their students. Practitioners should also encourage students to incorporate information and skills from their majors and classes into their roles, promote a culture allowing students to prototype and refine ideas, provide spaces for student leaders to operate in complexity and ambiguity, and endorse creative self-efficacy.

Allowing student leaders to have heavy involvement in creative practice considers the observation by Astin (1984) that investment in curriculum produces learning and developmental outcomes. Thus it follows that in order to develop creative characteristics in student leaders, they must be involved in a manner that requires them to be utilizing the desired skills. However, practitioners should carefully and purposefully structure the environment and learning activities in order to healthfully promote the skills and traits that will allow for development of creativity.

Limitations

While this study provides many beneficial suggestions, some limitations potentially affect the overall applicability of the data. Largely, there was limited diversity in the respondents (the majority of participants were female and white), meaning the results may not be entirely representative across the variables of gender and ethnicity. However, since all interview participants discussed a majority of the themes, it is unlikely a larger sample size would have contributed significantly different results. Timing also contributed to the problem of the sample size as the survey went out around the students' spring break, and the interviews occurred around final exams. As mentioned above, some participants misunderstood one of the questions, requiring the researcher to collect this data from fewer participants in the interviews. Finally, some responded to the survey using leadership positions outside the scope of this study, so their responses were excluded. Although these factors provided challenges in the process, none hindered the study enough to invalidate the findings.

Implications for future research

During the course of this study, multiple topics emerged as potential areas for future research. Primarily, it would be beneficial to see if a study on a larger variety of leadership positions, different demographics of student leaders, or different styles of institutions would provide results significantly different than those of this study. Additionally, a final area of research would be to find a reliable tool for measuring creativity and to perform a test before and after a student's experience in a leadership role. Such a tool would help provide quantitative data to describe the magnitude of leadership experience's impact on development of creativity. A study of this nature could also help to better assess the overall effectiveness of leadership experiences as a method of teaching creativity to undergraduate students.

Conclusion

Society today faces a variety of problems requiring comprehensive, interdisciplinary approaches. As there is higher demand for creative and innovative graduates, colleges and universities must determine how best to develop creativity in their students. Since many traits and skills associated with creative individuals overlap with developmental goals for a leadership experience, this study sought to examine the impact of a leadership experience on the development of creativity in undergraduate students. In order to assess this impact, the study addressed two research questions: Is creativity a developmental outcome of a student leadership experience? And what traits indicative of creative individuals are being developed in student leaders and how are these traits being developed? Students indicated development in an increased risk-taking tolerance, comfort with complexity and ambiguity, diversity in interests, an ability to prototype and refine ideas, an ability to make connections across disciplines, and creative self-efficacy. Factors in participants' experiences such as event planning, supervisors, and an environment that valued creativity played roles in allowing students to develop creative skills and traits while also helping student leaders redefine creativity and gain creative self-efficacy, if it was not present before. The participants of this study both demonstrated development of creative traits and attributed this development to their leadership experience. As such, it would seem a leadership experience, if thoughtfully and purposefully structured, can be an effective medium through which one can teach creativity.

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