

An Exploration of College of Agriculture Ambassador Programs



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Abstract

Through this grounded theory case study, researchers sought to explore the structure and organization of College of Agriculture ambassador programs. The population consisted of all four-year public universities with an identifiable College of Agriculture ambassador program. A total of 31 ambassador programs and 74 participants were included in the final sample. The study revealed the common components of an ambassador program as leadership development, promotional activities, relationship building, student benefits and standardized college presentations. Participants reported gains in leadership skills, academic knowledge and self-confidence in the many events offered through the program. A structured retreat and continuous training were important leadership development components. Being a knowledgeable expert was a major responsibility as ambassadors were considered the “face” of the college, particularly in recruitment. There were many incentives reported that made involvement worthwhile, including networking with key people. It was hoped that ambassador programs can utilize results to improve organizational functions and overall student leadership.

Introduction, Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Student leadership programs are found in all colleges and universities across the nation. These programs were not only to serve the mission of the university, but also enable students to develop personal and professional leadership skills (Astin, 1996). According to Ricketts and Bruce (2008), leaders were needed not only to build partnerships in communities, but to assume positions of leadership in life. Research has shown that while working to develop leaders for the 21st century, it was important to encourage skillful communication while promoting cooperation and understanding (Watt, 2003).

Research supports that leadership can be learned and there continues to be a growing number of formal leadership programs in higher education that promote skill development (Scott, 2004; Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt, 1999). Haber (2006) described formal leadership programs as “*intentionally designed learning opportunities aimed at expanding college students’ knowledge, skills and values*” (p. 30). Leadership programs are a unique experiential learning approach that uses a variety of educational strategies including teamwork and service learning (Komives et al., 2006). Haber and Komives (2009) found that involvement in student organizations was a critical experience specifically to enhance leadership development skills, peer engagement, community involvement and self-improvement. Hoover (2004) found that participation in collegiate student organizations can be positively associated with college retention and satisfaction; student development; increased interpersonal skills; leadership development; communication, teamwork, organizational, decision making and planning skills; and volunteering and community service. Undergraduate programs aim to advance leadership skills in a variety of areas such as problem solving, decision making, empowerment, planning, organization and communication (Hoover, 2004). Example collegiate programs that influence leadership include freshman orientation, seminars, student body councils, leadership institutes, public relations activities and academic and student recruitment organizations (Zimmerman and Burkhardt, 1999).

Astin’s (1999) student involvement theory predicted that learning increases when students are more involved in academic and social aspects while in college. An involved student is “one who devotes considerable energy to academics, spends a large amount of time on campus, actively participates in student organizations and activities and interacts often with faculty” (Astin, 1984, p.292). Student involvement

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as defined by Astin is “*the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience*” (p.518). Focus is placed on behaviors, quality and quantity of involvement that facilitate student development. Co-curricular involvement was identified as a significant variable that affected leadership outcomes related to personality and self-concept. The amount of time spent engaged in co-curricular activities was positively correlated with producing leadership qualities and outcomes. Some of the specific measures found to positively affect co-curricular involvement were student-student interaction, student-faculty interaction, fraternity/sorority membership and volunteer work. Each of these factors significantly contributed to leadership growth and development commonly associated with participation in student organizations (Astin, 1999).

Leadership development has been extensively researched with many youth organizations, including FFA and 4-H. The positive impacts on leadership through youth involvement in camps, projects, conferences, councils and after-school programs have been documented (Connors and Swan, 2006; Smith et al., 2005; Boyd, 2001). Continued involvement in collegiate programs further develops these necessary life skills. Connors (1996, p. 312) stated, “*For those students who embark on a career in agricultural education, it is vitally important that they continue to gain valuable experience in a collegiate agricultural education organization.*” Ewing et al. (2009) found that 434 (55%) of 789 College of Agricultural Sciences students surveyed participated in a collegiate organization and of those, 184 (23%) held an officer position. Research also revealed that all students felt that membership in a collegiate organization, whether they were an officer or not, positively contributed to leadership skill development. Dugan et al. (2011) researched the influences of program participation on university students’ capacities for socially responsible leadership and found that according to those that participated in an individual leadership experience, “*the highest involvement rates were for lecture/workshop series, conferences and a single leadership class*” (p. 75). This study also identified the specific need for additional research on college student leadership development using qualitative inquiry into the nature of leadership experiences, the integration of learning experiences and high impact educational strategies. College of Agriculture (COA) ambassadors are a unique student leadership program aimed at improving the overall excellence of the college and creating awareness of agriculture. Ambassador programs are generally composed of

agricultural student leaders who are directly involved with college promotion, recruitment and retention. Students serve as college representatives at a variety of public relations events and educate prospective students about university agriculture programs. Serving as the public face of Colleges of Agriculture requires ambassadors to emulate many leadership characteristics common in several leadership theories and approaches (Northouse, 2004).

Although there are varying differences in the mission statements of agricultural ambassador programs, common features include promotion of the college and its agricultural degrees, as well as recruitment and retention of students. The mission of agricultural ambassadors at Montana State University is to promote the COA by providing interactive experiences in careers and technologies as they relate to agriculture and natural resources (Ambassadors, n.d.). The purpose of the organization is to recruit and retain students in the COA, while instilling a life-long appreciation for agriculture and natural resources. Recently, the Montana State University COA ambassador membership dropped by 50% in one year due to lack of structure and guidance and the college was considering elimination of the program. Therefore, this exploratory study was conducted to better understand COA ambassador programs throughout the nation to gain ideas for program improvement and increase organizational effectiveness.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this case study was to explore how College of Agriculture ambassador programs are organized. The study addressed the following objectives: (1) To describe the organizational structure of College of Agriculture ambassador student leadership programs and (2) to develop a grounded theory that illustrates the common components of College of Agriculture ambassador student leadership programs.

Methods and Procedures

The population for the study was four-year public colleges and universities across the United States with an identifiable College of Agriculture ambassador program. The sample consisted of college ambassador programs that were on the official attendance roster for the 2008 National Agricultural Ambassador Conference. A purposive sample was utilized as it allows for the choice of people who are “typical” of a group and can represent diverse perspectives (Leedy and Ormrod, 2009). The purposive sample included 36 universities and approximately 300 students that

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attended the 2008 National Agricultural Ambassador Conference. This roster was regarded as a credible source of active and current ambassador programs representing all areas of the country.

In 2009 - 2010, Montana State University COA student ambassadors were assigned to research three or four university ambassador programs from the sample. Ten student ambassadors and the ambassador advisor from Montana State University served as primary researchers. A total of 31 ambassador programs were contacted and participated in the research. Five universities on the sample list were unable to be contacted and were eliminated. COA ambassador programs from the following states were included in the sample: Alabama, Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kentucky, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Vermont and Virginia. The advisor of the ambassador program and at least one current student ambassador were interviewed from each school. This methodology allowed data to be collected from both the leader and student perspectives. Seventy-four participants were included in the final sample.

The Montana State University Institutional Review Board approved the study protocol and all participants provided verbal informed consent prior to participation in the study. Telephone interviews served as the primary data collection method in order to obtain an understanding of the structure and organization of ambassador programs. All researchers completed IRB training prior to conducting research. All researchers also participated in a training session conducted by a qualitative researcher to standardize interviewing techniques and procedures to improve the dependability of the study. The researchers interviewed both an advisor and at least one student ambassador from each school and posed open-ended questions. Participants were encouraged to discuss the components, experiences, structure and organization of the ambassador program. Interviews were conducted over a four-month period and ranged from 30 minutes to one hour in length with each participant. Questions were created based on the study objectives, Astin's student involvement theory (1999) and Haber and Komives (2009) research. Questions centered on the following topics: goals, mission and program objectives; application and selection process; guidelines and requirements; training programs; recruitment and retention activities; leadership and service activities; evaluation and reporting; promotion; funding and support; audiences; challenges and obstacles; collaboration; interactions;

peer engagement; community involvement; and self-improvement. All participants were asked to share thoughts and perceptions regarding their experiences and offer suggestions for program improvement.

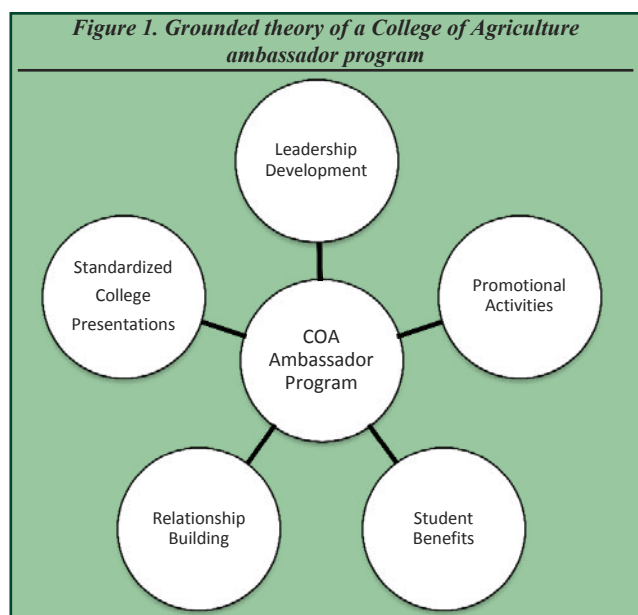
Researchers utilized a semi-structured interview guide which allowed for freedom in questioning and exploration during the sessions (Holstein and Gubrium, 2003). This type of interview was chosen because it supported the ability for different researchers to present initially prepared open-ended questions, but also initiate probing questions based on the participants' responses (Wengraf, 2001). Researchers posed all interview guide questions and listened while taking field notes. This overall approach proved beneficial in acquiring detailed explanations to similarly prepared questions, but also increased the ability to analyze data for significant concepts. Field notes taken by the researchers included key points, direct quotes, impressions, central concepts and answers from each question to assist in transferability of data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Then, as a group, researchers combined interview data and field notes to construct the fullest understanding of data from the participants' perspectives. All data was triangulated among researchers after the interviews in order to increase the credibility and confirmability of the collected data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Additionally, each ambassador presented individual findings to the entire group so that the group could gain an overall understanding of the data. All field notes were content analyzed based on data and personal interpretation to discover commonalities. A final data audit was conducted by the primary researcher to examine the data collection and analysis procedures for bias and distortion to enhance dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1985).

Conventional content analysis was the primary data analysis method (Charmaz, 2003). This analysis derives coding categories directly from the data that allows for a richer understanding of the information. Strategies including a data coding process, constant comparisons and refinement of emerging ideas were applied to form the foundation of the analysis (Charmaz, 2003). All data and field notes were triangulated among researchers in a group process after the interviews in order to construct an understanding of the data, as well as increase the credibility and confirmability of the data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). During data analysis, researchers allowed coding categories to emerge from the data rather than apply pre-conceived themes. Initial analysis began with individual open coding of interview field notes and then researchers coded together as a group to improve

inter-rater reliability (Leedy and Ormrod, 2009). Common codes were highlighted that were reflective of thoughts from participants. Codes were then sorted into themes based on relations and linkages to emergent coding categories. Synthesized themes were used to contextualize the data and establish clear concepts. A final data audit was conducted by the primary researcher to examine the data collection and analysis procedures for bias and distortion to enhance dependability and confirmability (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Results

The purpose of this case study was to explore how College of Agriculture ambassador programs are organized. Specific categories emerged from the data and were used to develop a grounded theory of a COA ambassador program (Figure 1). The main components of a COA ambassador program as reported by the majority of participants included leadership development, promotional activities, standardized college presentations, student benefits and building relationships.



Leadership Development

Leadership development was a common theme identified by all ambassador programs. Nearly every program interviewed provided a leadership retreat before or shortly after the start of fall semester. Some schools even expanded the retreat to be held in collaboration with other agricultural ambassador programs from the same or neighboring states. Participants stated that this provided an opportunity to “complete team building activities, network with other ambassadors and gain ideas for the upcoming year.”

The retreat was also considered the “optimal time to train new members and orient the team with the year’s activities.” A strong training program was considered “vital to the success of the ambassador program” as it provides members with an understanding of expectations, the ability to speak knowledgeably about university degrees and programs and the confidence to enter a classroom or event to represent the college. Additional topics included in the training were setting individual and group goals, providing members updated information on the university and college and scheduling major events. All programs except one sent representatives to the National Agriculture Ambassador Conference, which they said was a great way to “be proud of your own program while visiting with other ambassadors across the nation on ways to improve.”

As part of the leadership development process, the selection of new ambassadors was also discussed. Many schools had a formal selection process where students were required to interview with current ambassadors and faculty for a specific number of positions, while others allowed open program enrollment. The size of ambassador organizations varied from 10 - 100 students. Participants described this process as a critical program component to ensure that student leaders were of high quality.

Promotional Activities

COA ambassador programs found that as the economy declines, so does the opportunity to travel and recruit at high schools and events across the nation. Ambassador groups have individually tried to overcome such obstacles by mainly targeting junior colleges, recruiting at regional activities, hosting invitational events and visiting secondary schools close to home. Participants identified public appearances as one of the most important parts of being an ambassador. On and off-campus activities and tours were common across all programs. Having positive public interactions and representation at university events was critical to promotion. Many were frequently involved in alumni events, fundraising functions and conventions as “the face of the College of Agriculture”. One participant stated, “*We embrace the opportunity to be more involved in these events as it is vital that donors and others see and speak with current COA students. As agriculture ambassadors, we have a more visible appearance so others know not only what we do, but who we are.*” Many programs were involved in hosting a large on-campus event for potential students once or twice a year. Being involved in on-campus agricultural events, such as the State FFA

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convention, Ag Days and 4-H Congress, provided an excellent opportunity to reach large numbers of younger audiences without having to travel. One participant stated, *“We hope to strengthen our presence at these activities and let people know that we are available to provide tours and meet with students throughout the year. Additionally, while not as visible, we need to follow-up on these contacts with personal phone calls to potential students. Having someone know we are interested in them as an individual and a student could make a difference in where their tuition dollars are spent.”*

As an event host, a few programs provided students with a group lunch while others had ambassadors meet with each prospective student individually. There were also opportunities for students to stay in the dorms or spend the night with an ambassador. A few schools instituted a more personal on-campus event that consisted of an application process to select extremely high caliber students that were then invited to campus. Priority for off-campus recruitment was placed on agricultural secondary students and junior colleges. These audiences were considered to be the most cost-effective since students already have an identified interest in science and agriculture. By targeting district FFA competitions, 4-H meetings and workshops, livestock judging contests, 4-H Congress, science competitions and other agriculture or science-based events, the audience was more likely to be interested and receptive to ambassador presentations than a group of general students. To reduce costs and the amount of time missed during the semester, ambassadors were encouraged to visit a high school within their home area during breaks. This increased receptiveness from the students due to already established school connections.

Standardized College Presentations

Standardized presentations about the college and its degree programs were utilized by all ambassador programs. Some have specific academic degree presentations for each department. Participants said it is important that presentations are “readily accessible and user-friendly.” One participant stated, *“These presentations are valuable so that if a potential student arrives interested in agricultural education, then, for instance, an available plant science ambassador can open the agricultural education PowerPoint and knowledgeably walk through it with a student.”* Ambassadors work closely with faculty to develop interactive presentations suitable for small and large groups. By offering presentations that create awareness of the opportunities available within the College of

Agriculture, ambassadors can appeal to both traditional and non-traditional agricultural students.

Students Benefits

Advisors and students all agreed on the extensive time commitment required to serve as an ambassador. However, the personal and professional rewards of being an ambassador were numerous. Many commented on the leadership development, communication and self-confidence gained as a result of serving as an ambassador. Incentives varied among universities, but common examples included class credit, academic scholarships, early class registration, travel opportunities, or “incentive gifts”, such as computer accessories, college paraphernalia, or journals, for top students. For many, the ability to travel and attend the National Agricultural Ambassador Conference were valued rewards. Nearly every school interviewed strongly recommended that all ambassador programs attend this conference to gain recruitment ideas and network with other students.

Building Relationships

Building relationships was commonly identified as an important factor for programs to succeed. The most important relationships were identified as those with faculty, the Dean, department heads and admissions. These relationships were critical to reach larger groups of students for recruitment and retention purposes. Having strong relationships with the Dean was important in all ambassador programs. By maintaining connections with this office, each program was able to “be recognized, utilized and funded as a recruitment resource.” The majority of participants felt the Dean realized the importance of the ambassadors and their impact. Budgets were primarily funded through the Dean and ranged from \$3,000 - \$50,000 per program. Some schools were provided a set dollar amount per student in the college, while others were provided funds when needed. Overall, participants felt that they had access to adequate funds needed to complete their program goals. One common experience was to meet with the Dean annually to learn about the goals and outlook for the college and discuss how ambassadors can aid in the process.

There was variation in the activities that each program engaged in to build relationships with faculty and department heads ranging from panel discussions to class visits. Faculty commonly assisted in the nomination and selection process, provided access to non-agriculture students, promoted the activities of ambassador programs and served as key speakers. Other roles that faculty assumed were to assist in designing

science based presentations, offer technical content, provide updates on departmental news, academic programs and research and give recommendations of potential students and ambassadors. Working with the admissions office was also an important connection. Through this relationship, ambassadors had contact with potential agriculture students who contacted the campus instead of the college. Ambassadors worked closely with the admissions office to speak with students interested in agriculture and offer specialized tours. Some programs worked closely with the university tour guides and offered training on the College of Agriculture to have a better understanding of its programs.

Conclusions, Recommendations and Implications

Collegiate student organizations are a key component of Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement and undergraduate education. Organizations offer a multitude of opportunities for interactions and volunteerism which correlate with positive leadership development and personal growth. However, these programs must be structured around experiential learning to build essential leadership qualities (Komives et al., 2006). COA ambassador programs have the ability to engage students in a variety of activities that supplement the collegiate experience. Involvement in these social and academic activities has been proven to build critical leadership skills reported by Hoover (2004) and Astin (1999).

A structured retreat, coupled with continuous training, were important components to each ambassador program. This experience allowed the team to become a more cohesive unit, particularly for first year members to network with veteran ambassadors. Additionally, hosting a retreat or exchange with neighboring ambassador programs can help develop ongoing connections for the future. Being a knowledgeable expert about the college and university was a major responsibility. Developing standardized presentations about the university, the college and its related majors, degree options and collegiate organizations was necessary content knowledge. Additional information to answer frequently asked questions from potential students about campus events, financial aid and residence life would also be beneficial. During the year, training for public speaking should be emphasized so ambassadors can speak with confidence. A working binder of university and college information that is updated annually can educate new members to quickly gain the knowledge needed to be successful at the first events. Continuing

education should include the addition of guest speakers, specialists, industry members, alumni and administrators to the meetings. By bringing in experts, members can become familiar with all programs, versus just their own. While it is realistic to learn facts and figures, "*hearing firsthand about each program's benefits, current research, teaching, outreach and career opportunities can provide prospective students with additional information beyond the standard pamphlets.*" Different types of teaching and learning activities must be included by the advisor to assist members in building educational proficiencies.

Promotional activities varied among programs, but all were searching for new ideas to decrease costs and increase outreach. Ambassador programs must develop a more economically feasible recruitment strategy to supplement face-to-face visits around the state. Hosting on-campus invitational events was one way to gain access to large numbers of potential students. A specific recruitment event with tours, workshops, industry speakers and meetings with faculty and students can be more cost effective than traveling. Having a structured career day where students can participate in a college class or spend time with ambassadors can make the event more personal and influential. Many participants also mentioned the importance of being involved with alumni events. Staying connected with alumni can help to multiply recruitment efforts and connect with remote communities. If provided with sufficient information, alumni could be used to promote the college at local events.

One participant stated, "*To be an agricultural ambassador takes an extensive amount of time, energy and effort in addition to schoolwork and other activities.*" Yet, there were many benefits and incentives reported that made involvement worthwhile. The ambassador program's unique mission enables members to create key relationships within the college, university, industry and communities. Having an opportunity to work with leaders in these areas can build both personal and professional references for members. These relationships are beneficial as students search for internships and future careers. Traveling to local, regional, state and national events, including the National Agriculture Ambassador Conference, were valuable professional development opportunities.

For the majority of programs, the selection of new ambassadors included a personal interview process. This allowed members to identify the strengths of each applicant and their commitment to the organization. An informational session held for interested students prior to the application deadline could be valuable so they can learn about the requirements of the organization,

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ask questions and evaluate their fit. Top applicants can then be selected for the interview process which could include stations to showcase personal strengths.

Interestingly, less than 10% of programs interviewed discussed retention of current students. Although all did not have this in their mission statement, it was a central component of the majority of programs. Participants stated that on-campus events and mentoring relationships were the main retention activities of the organization. The lack of detailed discussion about retention of student warrants further research. Questions about retention activities, focus, importance and impacts should be asked to determine what is currently being done.

After interviewing ambassador programs from across the nation, the Montana State University College of Agriculture Ambassadors implemented the findings to improve its current program. A complete restructuring in the areas of selection, training, activities and requirements was initiated. The selection of new ambassadors now includes a carousel interview process of various stations, such as team building, personal interview, case scenarios, student questions and impromptu speeches, judged by current Ambassadors and COA faculty. This not only assists in recruiting quality students, but provides exposure of the program to other departmental faculty. Retreats and trainings have been re-designed to build knowledge, leadership and presentation skills. An annual weekend retreat, new ambassador trainings, socials, a training binder, impact statements and leadership updates have been established as requirements. In 2011, the Montana State University ambassadors worked in collaboration with neighboring states to create a two day Northwest Regional Ambassador Conference that included professional development, educational workshops, campus tours and idea exchanges. Modeling the program after other universities, the ambassadors developed a recruitment and retention plan to be more effective with available funds. This included attending regional events, increased participation in on-campus and alumni events and the development of a public COA off-campus tour. A professional, quality recruitment board and retractable display banners were developed with a graphic designer to promote a unified college image. Improved relations with the Admissions office through Phone-A-Thons, the development of a COA tour booklet and training of university representatives on the COA has created more educated recruiters overall. Recruitment items including Jeopardy, Plinko and a miniature golf game have also assisted in generating more booth interest at career events. Retention activities continue

to be a work in progress with ideas for more student-faculty interactions and events, collaborative organizational activities, a peer mentoring program, utilization of community alumni and increased public presence at agricultural events. Student involvement in undergraduate organizations has mutual benefits both to the student and the college. Students develop a greater appreciation for the college which can lead to overall increased retention for the university (Hoover, 2004). Advisors should continue to promote student involvement and co-curricular activities to enhance the total collegiate experience for all.

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