

Student Leader Preferences: What Students Want from Involvement in Student Organizations

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Abstract

This study was undertaken to determine preferences of conference participants regarding involvement in student leadership organizations. Registration forms for the 2003-2005 student leadership conferences at one state university were used to profile the demographic makeup, levels of participation, and preferences associated with involvement in student leadership organizations, as well as perceptions of the importance of and self-confidence in leadership skills. Factor analysis grouped the preferences from this survey into five themes: networking, recreational learning, academic interest, scholarship, and meeting times. Some preferences, such as educational activities and field trips were spread across these categories, providing natural bridges between themes around which to plan program activities.

This study had several implications that are immediately applicable to program planners. Preferences associated with individual variables (such as recreational events or educational activities) could help define those variables operationally, assisting in the development of a plan to optimize program impact. Purposefully applying an awareness of commonalities and differences within and between these themes could make planning and implementation more efficient and effective. An awareness of different expectations held by different demographic groups could help with both recruitment and retention in leadership programs.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, an acknowledged part of the "mission" of vocational and technical agricultural education has been to develop student leadership abilities (Brown and Fritz, 1994). Along with the growing number of leadership development courses offered for credit by collegiate agricultural education departments (Brown and Fritz, 1994; Fritz et al., 2003) "opportunities to...serve and observe in a variety of organizations beyond the academic environment" (Fritz and Brown, 1998) have become important teaching strategies for leadership development. To this end, the traditional support of agricultural educators for youth organizations such as FFA and 4-H as tools for leadership development contin-

ues beyond high school into the collegiate setting (Koch et al., 2005).

Recent changes in leadership paradigms have required changes in the way educators design leadership programs. Leadership is a valued attribute for employers and for society in general, one which is expected of university students upon graduation. Townsend (2000) has pointed out that leadership is dynamic, with an ever-changing combination of factors defined and valued differently by different scholars and practitioners. Universities and colleges often promote the development of leadership skills through the various professional and social organizations on campus. Since student participation in these organizations is usually not required, faculty and organizational advisors often struggle with how to increase student participation in leadership development activities through these organizations.

In 1992, the College of Agriculture in one state university instituted a conference to provide leadership development for current and potential student leaders. This annual one-day retreat, usually held on a Saturday early in the fall semester, has drawn approximately 400 participants since its inception (Agnew and Kennedy, 2005). This study was undertaken to determine the preferences of conference participants regarding involvement in student leadership organizations, in order to help advisors plan future student leadership conferences.

Literature Review

Leadership is considered by many to be important to the long-term success of university graduates. Employers want to hire graduates possessing communication and leadership skills (Andelt et al., 1997). Active student involvement in organizations and clubs has been shown to be a good way to develop leadership skills (Townsend, 2000; Schumacher and Swan, 1993; Birkenholz and Schumacher, 1994), with educational institutions serving as a natural leadership laboratory to develop student leadership tendencies (Townsend, 2000).

Cooper et al. (1994) cited evidence suggesting a strong positive connection between involvement in campus activities and student learning inside the classroom and out. Other research has recommended that agricultural colleges and departments go beyond

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technical skill development and provide students with more opportunities to develop leadership skills (Klein, 1990; Schumacher and Swan, 1993). Despite differences in approach, there has been an emerging consensus that leadership can be taught and transferred from one situation to another with leaders in one group emerging as leaders in other groups also (Townsend, 2000).

Several researchers have described benefits of participation in student organizations such as more intimate interpersonal relationships, greater interdependence, and higher development in educational, career, and lifestyle plans than their peers, furthering attainment of educational and developmental goals, promoting persistence to graduation (Cooper et al., 1994; Kuh et al., 2005). Leadership experience in student organizations increased the development of altruistic values and social concern. Members of student organizations had significantly higher life management skills upon entry into college compared to their peers and those who pursued membership through their junior year showed significantly higher growth in the lifestyle skills of developing purpose and academic autonomy. Students who pursued leadership roles began “ahead” of their non-leadership peers and showed continued growth, sustaining and further developing these skills (Cooper et al., 1994).

Schumacher and Swan (1993) found that 87% of college of agriculture students indicated a need for leadership training at the college level, and 81% of these indicated a willingness to participate. Despite this, they noted student perceptions that colleges of agriculture contributed little to their leadership skill development. Two-thirds of the faculty in colleges of agriculture perceived themselves as “ill-prepared to teach communication, interpersonal, and leadership skills” (Birkenholz and Schumacher, 1994). However, 68% of the college agriculture education departments surveyed by Fritz et al. (2003) offered leadership courses, although one-third of these courses did not include the word “leadership” in the title. Instructors for these courses were “primarily traditional agricultural educators with specialized leadership training” (p. 21). All administrators surveyed described student attitudes regarding these courses as positive or extremely positive.

Classroom study alone has been deemed insufficient for teaching public leadership and civic responsibility (Kerhbiel and MacKay, 1988). Working together in community outreach projects has been an important motivator for building teamwork, integrating communication skills, conflict management skills, and group process skills into a meaningful service experience (Haughey, 1999).

Townsend (2000) pointed out that leadership educators need to consider many factors affecting student leadership such as gender, cultural background, previous leadership experiences, and family makeup. She found gender to be a “significant factor”

in transference of leadership theory into practice. In that study, women in single-gender groups reported higher perceptions of leadership ability than those in co-educational groups, but men reported similar perceptions regardless of the gender makeup of the group. Other factors have been positively related to leadership skills such as administration and achievement were service as class officer or student government representative, participation in intramural sports, and membership in a livestock association (Schumacher and Swan, 1993).

Adapting student organizations to accommodate the needs of all students is becoming increasingly difficult. Most forward thinking organizations take into account needs and preferences of their members when planning programs (Komives et al., 1998). Barsi et al., (1985) and Schumacher and Swan (1993) have also noted the importance of determining student needs and preferences in order to lay the groundwork for leadership skill development plans.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify student preferences associated with their participation in student organizations at the College of Agriculture. Awareness of student preferences will help aid student leaders, members, and advisors in planning and conducting programs. The following research questions were developed to guide the researchers in the collection of data.

Research Questions

1. What are the demographic characteristics and levels of participation in college-sponsored student leadership organizations of the respondents registering at three successive annual Student Leadership Conferences?
2. What relationships exist between membership in student organizations, offices held, and demographic variables of gender, college enrollment status, class attendance patterns, driving distance, and employment?
3. What are the students' preferences for activities, emphases, and meeting times associated with involvement in College of Agriculture organizations?
4. To what extent do preferences for involvement in student organizations correlate to one another?

Methods

Data were collected by written survey of 84 students as part of the registration for the annual College of Agriculture Leadership Conference in September 2003, 2004, and 2005. Formatting and wording of the survey did not vary from year to year. The registration forms were developed by the conference committee chair and reviewed by a college leadership committee consisting of faculty from the four major disciplines within the college and one student. Demographic information collected included

affiliations with college-sponsored student leadership organizations, offices currently held, college major, class/grade level, gender, driving distance, weekly college attendance, and employment status. Respondents used a three-point Likert scale to rate 14 preferences in emphasis associated with participation in student organizations. No attempt was made to define preferences in the survey (e.g., “educational activities” or “recreational events”) beyond the personal interpretation of those terms as they were applied by the individual respondent.

Data were entered into an SPSS spreadsheet. Non-responses for variables of days on campus, college major, class/grade level, and employment status were entered as separate values and analyses based on these variables were conducted separately with and without filters for non-responses. Likert responses indicating preferences for involvement were entered as continuous variables with the greatest value indicating strongest agreement and missing values replaced by the series mean. Frequencies were tabulated for all variables and means were calculated for all continuous variables. Cross-tabulation was used to compare participation and office-holding by gender. Independent sample t-tests were used to compare mean differences in participation, the number of offices held, preferences for involvement, days on campus, and travel distance as a continuous variable. All tests of statistical significance were evaluated against a 95% confidence standard. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare grouped driving distance, employment status, class/grade level (as a categorical variable), and college major with the continuous variables of participation, preference, and perception. Bivariate correlations were computed for all continuous variables: total number of organizational affiliations, total number of offices held, days on campus, distance driven, and preferences for involvement. A maximum likelihood factor analysis was used to determine the dimensionality of the 14 preference variables for organization involvement. All factors with an eigenvalue greater than 1.0 were rotated using a Varimax rotation procedure.

Limitations

Survey responses were not anonymous, since they were part of a conference registration form that included the participant's name and address. Conference participants were selected through faculty nomination or personal invitation based on an existing leadership position in a college student organization, the recommendation of a student organization's advisor, or evidence of past leadership experiences given on student information forms in introductory courses. Of those invited to participate, approximately 65% to 75% were already active in student organizations within the college and the remaining 25% to 35% were usually incoming students with a leadership record. The sample size for

this pilot study was limited by the small number of participants who attended the annual conference at one small state university, but all of the participants attending each year returned surveys. Because this was an annual conference, there was a small percentage (less than 9%) of double sampling from year to year. However, it was determined that each year of undergraduate college experience is so context-specific that these successive samplings could be treated as unique and separate samples. Membership in student leadership organizations associated with the college and this conference is open to both undergraduate and graduate students, but almost all actual participation is at the undergraduate level.

Results and Discussion

Research Question 1: What are the demographic characteristics and levels of participation in college-sponsored student leadership organizations of the respondents registering at three successive annual Student Leadership Conferences?

Data were compiled for 29 respondents in 2003, 32 in 2004, and 23 in 2005 (N = 84). Of the 84 participants 46 were males (55%) and 38 were females (45%). The majority of the respondents (77%) were sophomores, juniors, and seniors in about equal proportions (see Figure 1). Respondents reported a mean driving distance to campus of 30.2 km (SD = 37.15) and a mean attendance of 4.5 days per week (SD = .92). Approximately two thirds of the respondents (64%) reported that they were employed part-time; most of the remaining respondents (21%) were not employed (see Figure 2). Ethnicity was not identified on the registration form, but anecdotal recollection showed no more than one non-Caucasian per year.

Twenty-one respondents (25%) did not indicate club affiliation; just over half of those indicating club

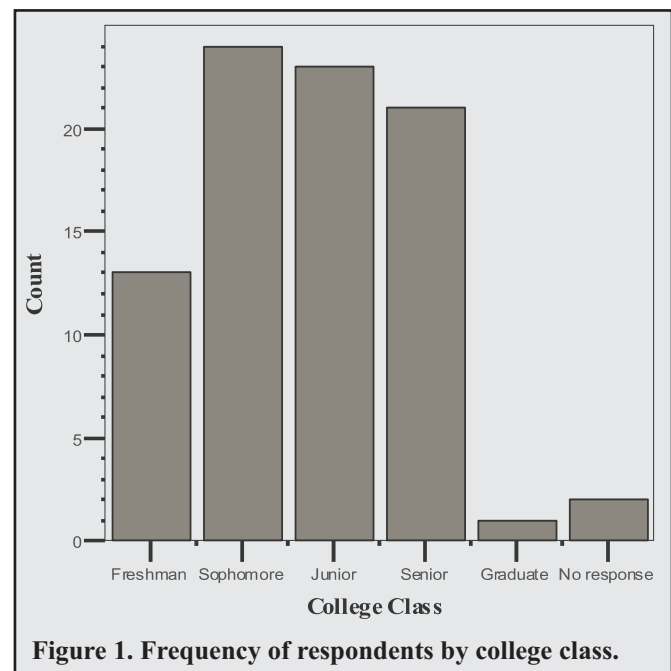


Figure 1. Frequency of respondents by college class.

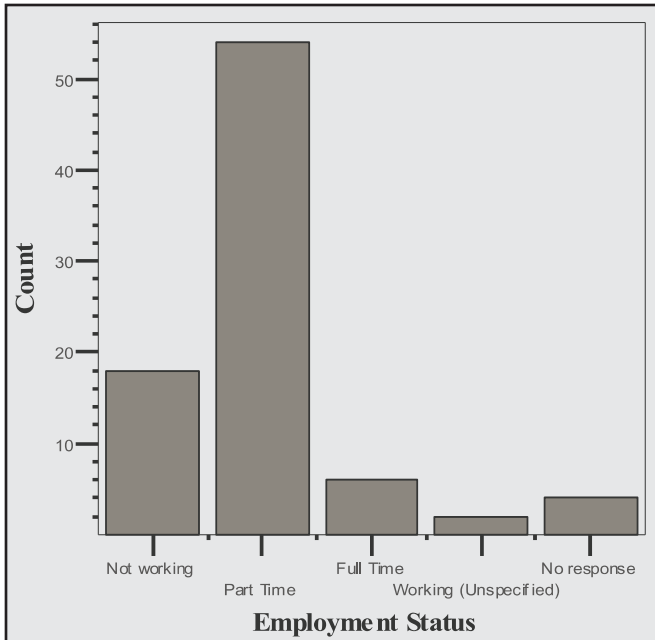


Figure 2. Employment status of respondents.

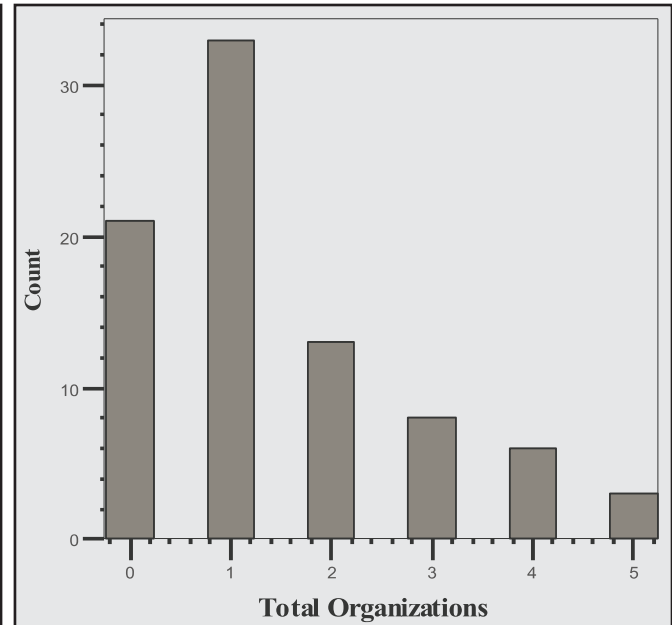


Figure 3. Total number of organizational affiliations per respondent.

memberships (33) were affiliated with one club and the remainder reported affiliation with more than one club (see Figure 3). More males than females reported membership in two organizations or less, but more females than males reported membership in three, four, or five organizations. Female respondents reported a higher mean number of memberships than male respondents (1.7 compared to 1.3), but a t-test showed a significance of only $p = .162$.

Research Question 2: What relationships exist between membership in student organizations, offices held, and demographic variables of gender, college enrollment status, class attendance patterns, driving distance, and employment?

There were highly significant differences between total numbers of organizational affiliations by office-holding status ($t = 1.740, p = .000$), with 26 office-holders affiliated with a mean of 2.7 organizations ($SD = 1.36$) and 58 non-office-holders affiliated with a mean of .9 organizations ($SD = .94$). Not only did respondents holding office belong to more organizations, there was a clear correlation between

the number of offices held and the number of organizations with which respondents were affiliated ($r = .592, p = .000$).

Individual club affiliations are cross-tabulated by gender in Table 1. Affiliations with Block and Bridle, Farm Bureau, and the Ag Business Clubs were about evenly divided between males and females. The gender distribution of membership in the Collegiate FFA was similar to that of the overall sample. Three times as many males than females reported membership in Alpha Tau Alpha and twice as many males as females were in the Plant Science Club, but twice as many females as males reported membership in Delta Tau Alpha, the Pre-Vet Medicine Club, and the Ag Club (at a satellite campus).

Table 2 shows a summary of offices held cross-tabulated by gender. Twice as many female respondents as male respondents indicated that they were current office-holders in a student organization. Analysis of these results by the individual office reported is limited by the size of this sample, but reports of holding office as president, vice-president, secretary, and treasurer were evenly divided (± 1) by gender. Both respondents holding the office of reporter were female. Those reporting multiple offices were overwhelmingly female (1 male, 6 females). There were also significant differences between total numbers of offices held by gender ($t = -2.741, p = .008$), with 46 male respondents holding a mean of .2 offices ($SD = .57$) and the 38

Table 1. Individual Club Memberships Cross-tabulated by Gender

Club Name	Male	Female	Total
Alpha Tau Alpha	3	1	4
Delta Tau Alpha	3	6	9
Collegiate FFA	12	8	20
Block and Bridle	7	7	14
Farm Bureau	3	3	6
Ag Business	9	9	18
Plant Science	4	2	6
Pre-Vet Medicine	3	6	9
Ag Club	4	8	12
Other	7	10	17

Table 2. Name of Office Cross-tabulated by Gender

Name of Office	Male	Female	Total
President	3	4	7
Vice President	2	1	3
Secretary	1	1	2
Treasurer	1	2	3
Reporter	0	2	2
Multiple offices	1	6	7
Other	1	1	2
None	37	21	58
Total	46	38	84

2.0 offices for “other” majors. There were no significant mean differences between single majors or single majors and non-responses.

There was a weak negative correlation between the number of offices held and the number of weekdays on campus ($r = -.257, p = .019$). However, distance traveled did not show a significant relationship to the number of offices held whether as a continuous or grouped variable.

Research Question 3: What are the students' preferences for activities, emphases, and meeting times associated with involvement in College of Agriculture organizations?

Table 3 shows the mean preference values (least preferable = 1, most preferable = 3) for 14 separately rated emphases in participation associated with college-sponsored student leadership organizations. Scholarship opportunities and professional development had the highest mean ratings (2.9). Meeting times had the lowest mean ratings, with daytime and afternoon/evening meetings at 2.3, and weekend meetings at 1.7.

Table 3. Ranked mean preferences for organizational involvement

Preference	Mean	SD
Scholarship opportunities	2.9	.32
Professional development	2.9	.32
Meeting others in one's major	2.8	.37
Field trips	2.8	.39
Recreational events	2.8	.45
Service inside the college	2.7	.48
Educational activities	2.7	.47
Service outside the college	2.6	.47
Meeting others outside one's major	2.6	.51
More active faculty advisor	2.5	.58
Meeting alumni	2.4	.53
Daytime club meetings	2.3	.67
Afternoon/evening club meetings	2.3	.63
Weekend club meetings	1.7	.71

Table 4. Correlations Between Preference Variables and Preference Factors

Preferences	Networking	Recreation	Academic	Scholarship	Meetings
Networking					
Meet alumni	.656	.370	.025	-.155	-.015
Meet outside major	.872	.179	-.091	-.058	.148
Meet inside major	.420	.055	.116	.176	.063
Professional development	.238	.133	-.044	.116	-.028
Recreational learning					
Service inside college	.147	.881	-.046	.103	.080
Recreational events	.205	.474	.247	-.081	-.024
Service outside college	.300	.413	-.035	.083	.084
Field trips	.188	.399	.289	.321	.152
Academic interest					
Daytime meetings	-.232	.020	.748	.115	.056
Active faculty advisor	.262	.162	.631	-.005	-.021
Educational activities	.308	.185	.319	.189	.175
Scholarship					
Scholarship opportunities	.068	.048	.018	.994	-.064
Out-of-school meetings					
Weekends	.086	.066	-.013	-.070	.991
Afternoons/evenings	.106	.155	-.448	.130	.311

Research Question 4: To what extent do preferences for involvement in student organizations correlate to one another?

All 14 preference variables were correlated in a single matrix. Maximum likelihood factor analysis revealed five factors with eigenvalues greater than 1.0, accounting for a cumulative 52% of the total variance. The Varimax procedure was used to rotate these five factors, yielding the rotated solution shown in Table 4. The

clustering of preferences according to this factor analysis forms the organizational framework for the following discussion.

Correlations among all preference variables except those for meeting times are shown in Table 5. A preference for daytime meetings (grouped in Factor III, “Academic Interest”) showed only one significant positive correlation, to a preference for more active involvement of the faculty advisor ($r = .427, p = .000$), and one significant negative correlation, to meeting others outside one's major ($r = -.271, p = .013$). Preferences for weekend club meetings (Factor

female respondents holding a mean of .7 offices (SD = .93).

Excluding two non-responses, class/grade level as a continuous variable correlated to both the total number of organizational affiliations ($r = .324, p = .003$) and the total number of offices held ($r = .389, p = .000$). A comparison of majors to the number of offices held showed a significantly higher mean number of offices held for respondents with a double major compared to respondents reporting any other category of major or cases with no response ($F(6,76) = 2.725, p = .019$). These differences ranged from a mean of 1.5 offices for agriculture education majors to

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V, “Out-of-School Meetings”) correlated only to afternoon/evening meetings ($r = .324, p = .003$) and meeting others outside one's major ($r = .238, p = .029$).

Factor I: “Networking”

The correlation between the “Networking” preferences for meeting alumni and meeting others outside one's major was the strongest in the entire preferences matrix (see Table 5). There was also a weak to moderate correlation between preferences for meeting others within and outside one's major. The weakest significant correlation between preferences for meeting others was between meeting classmates within one's major and meeting alumni.

The three different preference variables for meeting others showed considerable variation in the associations with other preference variables. Besides the afore-stated correlation with meeting classmates, a preference for meeting alumni also correlated significantly to preferences for recreational events, service inside the college, service outside the college, and educational activities. Besides meeting others outside one's major and alumni, a preference for meeting others in one's major only correlated significantly to opportunities for professional development. In contrast, a preference for meeting others outside one's major correlated significantly to nine of the 13 other preference variables surveyed, most notably to service outside the college and service inside the college. A preference for meeting others outside one's major correlated less significantly to preferences for recreational events, educational activities, weekend club meetings, and field trips. A preference for meeting others outside one's major was negatively correlated to a preference for daytime meetings.

A preference for professional development also loaded into the “Networking” factor. Professional development was correlated significantly to meeting others in one's major, service outside the college, and educational activities.

Factor II: “Recreational Learning”

The correlation between preferences for service inside and outside the college was the strongest correlation in the “Recreational Learning” factor (see Table 5). Preferences for service both inside and outside the college correlated significantly to preferences for meeting alumni and meeting others outside one's major. However, preferences for service outside the college also correlated significantly to preferences for professional development, whereas preferences for service inside the college correlated significantly to preferences for recreational events and field trips.

A preference for recreational events was significantly correlated with preferences for service inside the college, field trips, and meeting alumni. A preference for recreational events was less significantly correlated with a preference for meeting others outside one's major.

A preference for field trips correlated most significantly to preferences for educational activities, recreational events, service inside the college, and scholarship opportunities. A preference for field trips correlated less significantly to meeting others outside one's major and increased active involvement of the faculty advisor.

Factors III and IV: “Educational Activities” and “Scholarships”

A preference for educational activities correlated most significantly to preferences for field trips and more active involvement of the faculty advisor, less significantly with meeting alumni, meeting others outside of one's major, and professional development (see Table 5). A preference for more active involvement of the faculty advisor correlated significantly with preferences for daytime meetings, educational activities, and field trips. A preference for scholarship opportunities showed only one significant correlation, to a preference for field trips.

Other Variables Related to Organizational Preferences

The total number of organizations with which respondents were affiliated had small, but significant correlations to several preference variables. These were: field trips ($r = .286, p = .008$), daytime meetings ($r = .233, p = .033$), a more active faculty advisor ($r = .230, p = .036$), and professional development ($r = .220, p = .044$).

College class/grade level (excluding non-responses) correlated with preferences for service inside the college, ($r = .255, p = .021$), meeting others in one's major ($r = .247, p = .025$), and meeting others outside one's major ($r = .218, p = .050$). Respondents majoring in agriculture education and animal science had significantly higher mean preferences for educational activities than those in agriculture business and plant science ($F(7,76) = 2.488, p = .030$).

Summary

Membership in college-sponsored student leadership organizations did not show significant differences overall by individual demographic characteristics. Office-holders belonged to nearly three times as many organizations as non-office-holders and were more likely to be upperclassmen. Students declaring a double major held more offices than those with a single major and six out of seven students holding more than one office were female. Overall, respondents affiliated with a greater number of organizations showed weak but significant preferences for field trips, daytime meetings, a more active faculty advisor, and professional development. Upper level students were also associated with increased preferences for service inside the college and meeting others in and out of one's major.

The highest-ranked preference for involvement

in these organizations was for scholarship opportunities, yet scholarship opportunities correlated significantly only to field trips. Preferences for educational activities and recreational events were both associated with field trips and outside networking (meeting alumni and others outside one's major), but educational activities were also associated with a more actively involved faculty advisor and an opportunity for professional development. Recreational events were further differentiated from educational activities by association with service opportunities in the college and a much more significant association with meeting alumni. Similarly, service opportunities both inside and outside the college were associated with outside networking, but only service outside the college was associated with professional development.

These results also provided a contrast in the various elements of networking. Meeting others outside one's major was associated with more preferences than any other variable. Both meeting others outside one's major and meeting alumni were closely associated with networking and service (in and out of college), less so with educational activities. Meeting alumni was much more strongly associated with recreation than was meeting others outside one's major. Meeting others in one's major was closely associated only with other preferences for networking.

Recommendations

Despite differences that may exist in the history, culture, and organizational climate of individual universities or colleges within a university, many general issues of student preferences relating to recreation, meeting others, and professional or academic enrichment relate broadly to student participation in leadership-oriented organizations. Preferences associated with specific variables help to define those variables operationally, which can be very useful for developing leadership programs that optimize the impact of one variable (such as educational activities) by also focusing on its associated elements. Additionally, an awareness of these operational associations can be used to guide the development of individual organizations with a more purposeful development of goals, activities, targeted recruitment efforts, and other areas of interest.

Clustering preferences provides a frame for students' expectations, grouping them into common interests that form organizational themes for program development. Awareness of both commonalities and differences within these themes can make planning and implementation of programs more efficient and effective. Of particular interest in this clustering were a few key "bridge" factors that clustered in tiers. For example, a preference for educational activities loaded almost equally into the academic interest and networking clusters, with a second tier of nearly equal loading into recreation,

scholarship, and meeting times. This suggests using an educational activity as an avenue to promote both academic interest and networking, perhaps as part of a recreational event or scholarship opportunity. A preference for field trips was another "bridge" factor with close loading into a first tier of recreation, scholarship, and academic interest, followed by a second tier of networking and meeting times. Similarly, a preference for recreational events showed a second tier association with academic interest and networking, and service outside the college was also secondarily associated with networking. Purposeful coordination of programs that optimize these connections can greatly improve the appeal and effectiveness of college-sponsored leadership organizations.

Those more involved in student organizations are also more likely to favor the academic interest cluster of preferences and daytime meetings. Since these are the students who are often most involved in planning and setting goals, these biases should be considered in relation to the preferences of the membership at large in order to build a balanced program that serves a wider range of interests. Student expectations for the role of faculty advisor in a student leadership organization seem to be most closely related to academic functions of the organization, such as field trips and educational activities associated with daytime events. Student interest in networking with others outside the college presents a strong argument for more interdisciplinary efforts to organize in ways that assist these contacts.

Assuming this survey reflects the preferences of the student leaders in the College of Agriculture, the questions then becomes: is there a difference in the preferences of these identified student leaders and other students in the college? Further research is needed to assess any difference in preferences between identified student leaders and other students within the College of Agriculture.

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