Meeting Diverse Needs through Student Leadership Organizations: The Dilemma of Working and Commuting Students

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Abstract

Since 1992, the Arkansas State University College of Agriculture has held a one-day fall leadership conference to provide leadership development opportunities. Students participating in the conference were nearly all undergraduates majoring in agriculture. More than half of the participants commuted more than 10 km and four out of five were employed at least part time. This study was undertaken to determine if conference participants who worked or commuted to college had different needs and expectations for student leadership organizations than their non-working, on-campus peers. Travel distance and employment status did not show any correlation to the number of offices held or organizational affiliations. Students who worked full time traveled significantly farther and attended significantly fewer days on campus. Students working part time had the shortest commuting distance, highest attendance rate, and most interest in recreational events associated with their organizational experience. Students who worked full time and commuted moderate distances (10-40 km) had preferences for involvement in student leadership organizations that sometimes conflicted with those of on-campus students working part time or less. Students working full time and commuting moderate distances also expressed lower self-confidence in their leadership skills and lower perceptions of the importance of leadership skills in employment.

Introduction

Although the effort to define leadership competencies and methods for teaching them represents a relatively new strand of leadership inquiry, 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. However, leadership is a dynamic process involving an ever-changing combination of factors defined differently by different scholars and practitioners (Townsend, 2000). Not least among these practitioners are the student leaders who are active participants in their college leadership organizations. Recent changes in student demographics toward a more non-traditional model present a growing challenge for planning leadership development programs that are appropriate and accessible for all potential participants.

In 1992, the Arkansas State University (ASU) College of Agriculture instituted a student leadership 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 compare the needs and expectations of working and commuting students participating at this conference to those of non-working, on-campus peers, in regard to involvement in student leadership organizations. An analysis of differences was expected to be useful to advisors planning future conferences with a specific focus on diverse student needs for leadership development.

Literature Review

According to the U.S. Department of Education, a non-traditional college student is one who delays enrollment after high school, attends part-time, works full time, is financially independent, has dependents other than a spouse, is a single parent, or does not have a high school diploma. More than half (57.5%) of the undergraduates enrolled at public four year institutions in 1999-2000 met at least one of these conditions (AASC/NASULGC, n.d.). ASU defines the non-traditional student more narrowly as one who is 25 years of age or over, married (at any age), or a single parent (ASU Tribal Life Office, personal communication). In the 2004-2005 academic year, the first year that ASU compiled data on

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non-traditional students, 3,557 out of 9,262 (33.9%) undergraduates were 25 years of age or older. However, the proportion of older students was smaller within the ASU College of Agriculture, where 81 out of 392 (20.7%) undergraduates were 25 years of age or older (Arkansas State University, 2005). Data regarding married and single-parent students at ASU were still being compiled as of this writing.

Enrollments in degree-granting post-secondary institutions in the US increased 86% between 1970 and 2001, but at a declining rate, with an increase of 16% from 1981-1991, compared to 11% from 1991-2001 (NCES, 2005). From 1970 to 2004, the number of higher education students 25 years of age or older rose from 28% to 39% (Lane, 2004). However, according the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) there has been a more rapid increase in younger students since 1990. The number of students under the age of 25 increased by 16% between 1990 and 2000, while the number of students aged 25 and over increased by only 3% in the same time period (NCES, 2005). The number of students working full time rose from 15% to 40% between 1970 and 2004 and close to 30% had children in 2004 (Lane, 2004).

The U.S Department of Education reported a "wide gap in educational mindsets and goals" between traditional and non-traditional students (National On-Campus Report, 2005, p. 6). Older working undergraduates were much more likely to describe themselves as "employees who study," rather than "students who work," with 43% of students in their 20s identifying themselves as employees first, compared to 60% of those in their 30s and 68% of those aged 40 or more. "Employees who study" were also more likely to be married (52%) and with dependents other than a spouse (57%) as compared to "students who work" (31% married, 43% with dependents) (NCES, 2003). In a 1990 survey, just over half the students at Saddleback Community College reporting family responsibilities indicated that they did not interfere with school, but only 30% of working students said their job did not interfere with school (Sworder, 1992).

About five out of six ASU undergraduates live off-campus (Arkansas State University, 2005). Although off-campus residency is not a criterion of non-traditional status as defined by either the U.S. Department of Education or ASU, the time-management and financial burdens arising from commuting long distances to campus present barriers similar to those faced by non-traditional students. In this respect, ASU shares many of the challenges commonly associated with community colleges in regard to accommodating the special needs and expectations of a largely commuting student population. At Saddleback Community College, only 24% of the students reported that they looked in the student newspaper or on bulletin boards for notices about campus events and student organizations. Only 11% actually attended a meeting (Sworder, 1992). In contrast, Schumacher and Swan (1993) found that college of agriculture students living on campus agreed less strongly with their leadership constructs than those living off campus. Later studies, however, determined that students who lived in structured housing arrangements, such as fraternities and dormitories, displayed enhanced leadership skills (Birkenholz and Schumacher, 1994).

The additional demands on non-traditional students are not without effect. The U.S Department of Education has reported that non-traditional students "are more likely to leave college during their first year than their peers" (AASC/NASULGC, n.d., p. 17). This tendency presents a challenge to administrators to create programs that will promote the retention of these non-traditional students. Bowl (2001) has described a need for change in the culture of higher education institutions to encourage enrollment and participation of non-traditional students. Bowl noted that "mature" non-traditional students have reported a sense of "disjunction" upon entry into higher education, resulting in feelings of culture shock and personal powerlessness. This sense of dislocation often affects older students differently than traditional 18-year-old entrants (Bowl, 2001).

Bowl (2001) observed that a traditional student can readily build a social and academic support structure around university life, whereas a non-traditional student is faced with the necessity to fit academic demands into continuing responsibilities of employment, childcare, and family and community expectations. The necessity to accommodate these responsibilities increases the "need for a shared understanding between educators and [non-traditional] students which ensures that the difficulties encountered by the latter are acknowledged and addressed" (Bamber and Tett, 2000, p. 60). Extensive on-going support mechanisms may be required to facilitate achievement. Integrative learning experiences, implementing academic and theoretical knowledge in actual social settings, were found to build confidence and self-esteem, especially with students who had previous negative experiences with education. Participation and continuing support as part of the student community also helped reduce "the sense of 'otherness' in higher education" by supporting and reinforcing the positive aspects of a diverse student body (p. 73).

Several researchers have described benefits of participation in student organizations that included 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).

Vocational student organizations are often regarded as important vehicles for leadership education, building communication skills and self-confidence while working with others (Montana Council on Vocational Education, 1993). Organizations such as Collegiate FFA and 4-H have historically represented "natural leadership laboratories" with strong traditional ties to agricultural education (Townsend, 2000). Participants in these organizations have identified a greater perception of leadership skill development, expressed by increased perceptions of decision-making abilities, communication, self-understanding, and abilities to work with groups (Fritz et al., 2003).

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, p. 1). Sixty-eight percent 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.

Townsend (2000) stated that leadership educators should consider many factors affecting student leadership such as gender, cultural background, previous leadership experiences, and family makeup. Most forward thinking organizations also take into account needs and preferences of their members when planning programs that lay the groundwork for leadership skill development (Barsi et al., 1985; Komives et al., 1998; Schumacher and Swan, 1993).

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to identify preferences and expectations associated with the participation of working and commuting students in college-sponsored leadership organizations at ASU. Awareness of student expectations will be useful for 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. To what extent do differences exist in membership and office-holding based on variables of driving distance and employment?
3. To what extent do weekly attendance patterns and preferences for organizational involvement correlate to driving distance and employment status?
4. What are the perceived differences in the importance of leadership skills to employers and self-confidence in leadership skills, based on variables of driving distance and employment?

Methods

Data were collected using a survey instrument developed by the researchers and administered to 84 students as part of the registration for the annual ASU College of Agriculture Leadership Conference in September 2003, 2004, and 2005. Conference attendees were invited based on leadership positions in college student organizations, nominations by student organization advisors, or self-identified 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 registration forms were developed by the conference committee chair and reviewed by the college leadership committee responsible for planning the event. The leadership committee consisted of faculty from the four major disciplines within the college and one or more students. The instrument was not anonymous, since it requested personal information to enable follow-up activities and the issuance of a press release to the participants' hometown newspapers. Demographic information that was collected included affiliations with college-sponsored student leadership organizations, any offices currently held, college major, class/grade level, gender, driving distance, weekly college attendance, and employment status. Respondents used a 3-point Likert scale to rate 14 preferences in emphasis associated with participation in student organizations and a 5-point Likert scale to rate perceptions of self-confidence in leadership skills and the importance of leadership skills to employers..

Data Analysis

Survey 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. All tests of statistical significance were evaluated against a 95% confidence standard. One-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and Lowest Standard Deviation (LSD) Means tests were used to compare grouped driving distance and employment status with the continuous variables of participation, preference, and perception. Independent samples t-tests were used to compare self-confidence ratings and perceptions of the importance of leadership skills between office-holders and non-office-holders. Bivariate correlations were computed for the total number of organizational affiliations, the total number of offices held, days on campus, distance driven, and preferences for involvement.

Limitations

This pilot study included small percentages (less than 9%) of double sampling from year to year, but 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. As a matter of study design, it was determined that this method would introduce less bias than simply dropping double attendees or excluding either first or second year attendees systematically Survey responses were not anonymous and participants were selected through faculty nomination and personal invitation. Although every university, even every individual college within a university, has its own unique history, culture, and organizational climate, many issues that this study brought to light are relevant in a broader context.

Results and Discussion

Demographic Characteristics and Levels of Participation in Student Leadership Organizations

Data were compiled for 29 respondents in 2003, 32 respondents in 2004, and 23 respondents in 2005 (N = 84). Since this sample was drawn from an annual conference, there was a 9% overlap in respondents (5 out of 56) between 2003 and 2004, and an 8% overlap (4 out of 51) between 2004 and 2005. Respondents who attended more than one year were included each year as separate cases.

This sample included 46 males (55%) and 38 females (45%). The respondents included 13 freshman (16%), 24 sophomores (29%), 23 juniors (27%), 21 seniors (25%), 1 graduate student (1%), and 2 who did not indicate class/grade level (2%). More than 90% of the respondents in this sample indicated majors in agriculture, including 3 who listed double majors, at least one major of which was agriculture-related. Only 5% of the respondents indicated single majors in non-agricultural fields. Twenty-one respondents (25%) indicated no organizational affiliation, 33 indicated one organization (39%), 13 indicated two organizations (16%), 8 indicated three organizations (10%), 6 indicated four organizations (7%), and 3 indicated five organizations (4%). Of the 27 respondents who reported holding office in one or more student organizations, 19 held one office, 6 held two offices, 1 held three offices, and 1 held 4 offices.

Of the 76 respondents who indicated a driving distance to campus, the mean distance was 30.2 km (SD = 37.15). When driving distances were grouped into less than 10 km, 10-40 km, and over 40 km travel distances, 34 respondents (41 %) reported travel distances of less than 10 km, 19 (23%) reported 10-40 km, and 22 (26%) reported over 40 km. Nine respondents (11%) did not report a travel distance or otherwise clearly indicate on-campus residence. Respondents reported a mean attendance of 4.5 days per week (SD = .92), with 62 respondents (74%) on campus five days per week. Eighteen respondents (21%) identified themselves as not employed, 54 (64%) reported part time employment, and six (7%) reported full time employment. Two respondents (2% indicated that they were employed but did not clarify whether full or part time, and four (5%) did not indicate employment status.

Lack of Association between Distance, Employment, and Office-Holding

Distance as a continuous variable did not significantly correlate to the number of offices held or the number of organizational affiliations. There were no significant differences by grouped distances or employment categories for the number of offices held or the number of organizational affiliations. There was, however, a weak negative correlation between the number of weekdays on campus and the number of offices held ($r = -257$, $p = .019$).

Preferences for Organizational Participation and Attendance Related to Work and Travel

Table 1 shows the mean preference values for all conference participants for 14 separately rated emphases in participation associated with college-sponsored student leadership organizations. Preferences for scholarship opportunities and professional development had the highest mean ratings of 2.9. Meeting times had the lowest mean preferences, with daytime meetings and afternoon/evening meetings of 2.3, and weekend meetings of 1.7.

Travel distance as a continuous variable showed no significant correlation to organizational preferences, the number of organizational affiliations, or the number of days on campus. However, when compared by grouped travel distance, there were significant mean differences in preferences for the "networking" variables of meeting others outside

Table 1. 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	.36
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	.52
More active faculty advisor	2.5	.58
Meeting alumni	2.4	.53
Daytime meetings	2.3	.67
Afternoon/evening meetings	2.3	.63
Weekend meetings	1.7	.71

(Minimum value = 1; maximum value = 3)

Table 2. One-way ANOVA Results for Preferences by Employment Group

Preference Variable	Mean ratings (total possible = 3)		F[z]	df	p
Recreational Activities	Not employed	2.6			
	Part time	2.9	4.375	2,75	.016
	Full time	2.5			
Service outside College	Not employed	2.7			
	Part time	2.7	3.198	2,75	.046
	Full time	2.2			
Professional development	Not employed	2.9			
	Part time	2.9	4.188	2,75	.019
	Full time	2.5			
Meeting others in major	Not employed	2.9			
	Part time	2.9	4.234	2,75	.018
	Full time	2.5			
Daytime organization meetings	Not employed	2.4			
	Part time	2.4	5.225	2,75	.008
	Full time	1.5			

[z]The critical value $F_{(2,75)} = 3.12$, $p < .05$

one's major ($F(2,72) = 4.443$ $p = .015$) and meeting alumni ($F(2,72) = 7.373$, $p = .001$). Respondents traveling 10-40 km indicated a mean preference for meeting others outside one's major that was significantly lower than that of respondents in the less than 10 km or the 40 km travel groups (.4 out of 3 possible). Respondents in 10-40 km group also had a significantly lower mean preference for meeting alumni than both the less than 10 km and over 40 km travel groups (.4 and .6 out of 3 possible).

A comparison of travel distance as a continuous variable by employment status showed significant differences ($F(2,75) = 4.091$, $p = .021$). Respondents employed part time traveled an average of 20.4 km, while non-employed respondents traveled an average distance of 28.5 km and full-time employees traveled an average of 60.3 km. The mean travel difference of 39.9 km between respondents employed full time and those employed part time was significant ($p = .016$), but the mean travel difference between full-time and non-employed respondents was not.

There were significant mean differences between the number of weekdays on campus by employment group ($F(2,75) = 3.208$, $p = .046$). Respondents employed full time attended on average 3.8 days per week and those employed part time 4.7 days per week, a significant difference. The average difference in attendance between respondents employed full time and those who were not employed, 4.4 days per week, was not significant.

Table 2 shows one-way ANOVA results for preferences regarding recreational activities, service outside the college, professional development, meeting others in one's major and daytime meetings, as compared by employment groups. Mean preferences for service outside the college, professional development, meeting others in one's major, and daytime meetings all had nearly identical values for part-time employees and non-employed respondents, but significantly lower values for full-time employees ($p(\text{LSD Means}) \leq .025$). There were also significant differences in preferences for recreational activities between part-time and full-time employees ($p(\text{LSD Means}) = .033$) and between part-time employees and non-employed respondents ($p(\text{LSD Means}) = .023$), but not between full-time employees and non-employed respondents ($p(\text{LSD Means}) = .526$).

Perception of the Importance of Leadership Skills and Self-Confidence

Respondents reported self-confidence ratings and perceptions of the importance of leadership skills to potential employers using a 5-point Likert scale. The mean perceived importance of leadership skills was 4.9 (SD = .51); the mean for self-confidence in leadership skills was 3.9 (SD = .88). Perceived self-confidence in leadership skills was positively correlated to the total number of organizational affiliations ($r = .233$, $p = .033$) and the number of offices held ($r = -.261$, $p = .017$). The mean perception of self-confidence in leadership skills for office-holders was 4.2 (on a scale of 1 out of 5), significantly higher than the rating of 3.7 reported by non-office-holders ($t = 2.310$, $p = .025$).

There were significant differences in self-confidence in leadership skills compared by employment groups ($F(2,75) = 3.229$, $p = .045$). Non-

employed respondents indicated a mean self-confidence rating of 4.2 (maximum possible = 5); part-time employees indicated a mean rating of 3.8, and full-time employees indicated a mean rating of 3.2. The mean difference of 1.0 between full-time employees and non-working respondents was significant (p(LSD Means) = .015), but differences between other groups were not.

A comparison of the perceived importance of leadership to employers also showed significant differences between employment groups ($F(2,75) = 4.121$, $p = .020$). Non-employed respondents reported a mean perceived importance of leadership skills to employers of 4.8 (maximum possible = 5); part-time employees reported a mean rating of 4.9, and full-time employees reported a mean importance rating of 4.3. There were significant differences between the ratings of full-time and part-time employees (p(LSD Means) = .006) and between those of full-time employees and non-employed respondents (p(LSD Means) = .037).

Compared by grouped travel distance, there were no significant mean differences in perceived importance of leadership skills to employers. However, mean differences in self-confidence in leadership skills compared by these same grouped distances were significant ($F(2,72) = 3.281$, $p = .043$). Respondents in the 10-40 km travel distance group reported a mean perception of self-confidence in leadership skills of 3.5 (on a scale of 1 to 5), .6 less ($p = .013$) than the mean perception reported by respondents in the under 10 km group. There was no significant mean difference in perception of self-confidence in leadership skills between the 10-40 km and over 40 km groups.

Summary

Each institution has logistical embedded elements that can help or hinder working and commuting student participation in programs that promote leadership. Organizational leaders and sponsors at each institution must look at their own situation and build on the understanding of their students' needs to adapt what they do to enhance the leadership development experience of students. The following are intended to be guiding principles that can help program planners or student organization advisors make better decision in this area:

- Provide activities to involve and engage the interest of these students
- Adapt programs to interest working and commuting students on their own terms
- Work to increase flexibility scheduling for student activities
- Provide counseling about the trade-offs between working/commuting and leadership benefits of participation in leadership organizations, especially if working is an option of preference rather than necessity
- Promote the benefits of leadership opportunities associated with student organizations
- Further study exploring the relationship between student employment and perceived importance of leadership skills

Students who commuted and worked full-time had preferences that sometimes conflicted with students who did not have to balance these "outside" concerns, expressing less interest in recreational and networking variables such as outside service, professional development, and meeting others, especially in daytime meetings. According to Bowl (2001), non-traditional students are much more encumbered by work and family responsibilities than the traditional 18-year-old student, so they cannot easily juggle more commitments. This conflict presents a unique challenge to a student leadership program to provide activities that involve and engage the interest of these students. The lower self-confidence ratings and lower perception of the importance of leadership skills to potential employers expressed by these groups makes it all that much more important that leadership programs be adapted to interest them on their own terms.

Commuting and employment status were not significantly related to the number of organizational affiliations or offices held. However, the number of days spent on campus was significantly related to commuting and employment status. Students employed full-time traveled significantly farther and attended significantly fewer days per week than students employed part-time. Students employed part-time also tended to have the shortest average commuting distance, attend the most days per week, and be most interested in recreational events as part of their organizational experience. Student groups that have a high number of working and commuting students may need to provide more flexibility in scheduling activities.

Respondents affiliated with a greater number of organizations and those holding more offices indicated higher self-confidence ratings in leadership skills, reinforcing the findings of other researchers associating involvement in integrative learning experiences with higher self-confidence in leadership skills (Bamber and Tett, 2000). In order to develop self-confidence in leadership skills one must be provided with leadership opportunities. A concerted effort to promote these opportunities could be a vital link in reaching commuters and students who work full-time. Commuters in the middle travel distance group and full-time employees both indicated significantly lower self-confidence in leadership skills. Perhaps it would be in the best interest of students who commute and work full time if they were provided counseling about the potential trade-offs between commuting or working and involvement in student leadership organizations, identifying the possible negative impact on future career options posed by lower self-confidence in leadership skills. Of

course, many students must work to support their educational endeavors and many do not have the option to live on or near campus. For those who work or commute by preference rather than necessity, however, opting for short-term sacrifices in employment might lead to greater participation and richer experiential learning, resulting in more self-confidence that could provide long-term benefits that exceed short-term sacrifices.

Respondents who were employed full-time also reported lower ratings for the importance of leadership skills to potential employers, compared to other employment groups. This may be an expression of disillusionment in the face of job experience, or it may be a lack of positive self-image and projection due to inadequate leadership skill development in the past. Perhaps leadership is not valued by the types of employers that students have at this stage of their lives, distorting the views expressed in relation to leadership needs. An exploration of the reasons for the relationship between student employment levels and the perceived importance of leadership skills could form an interesting basis for subsequent research studies.

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