

# Thirteen Years of Student Leadership Conferences: Lessons Learned



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## Abstract

Leadership ability is recognized as important among all professions. The problem of weak leadership among college student leaders and their organizations recurs each year as older leaders graduate or move on and new or less experienced leaders step forward into leadership positions. Weak leadership is sometimes rooted in a lack of awareness of the possibilities and opportunities and can be overcome through education. To overcome these problems, a new leader orientation session was planned for two college student organizations. The idea grew into a college-wide leadership conference with student leaders from eight College of Agriculture student organizations invited to participate. The first annual "College of Agriculture Student Leadership Conference" was conducted in 1992. From the beginning the consensus among the planners, dean, agricultural community, and the students participating in the event was that this should be continued as an annual event. Over the 13-year history of the event, annual evaluations reveal underlying principles that help guide the planning process. While cultural and institutional differences exist across the U.S., these lessons offer a starting point from which other conference planners can begin a dialogue on how to plan their own leadership conference.

## Introduction

Leadership skills are important to the long-term success of college graduates. Employers have expressed a desire to hire college graduates that possess both communication and leadership skills (Andelt et al., 1997). Research has suggested that agricultural colleges and departments should go beyond technical skill development and provide students with more opportunities to develop their leadership skills (Klein, 1990; Schumacher and Swan, 1993). Encouraging students to become active in student organizations is a good way to develop leadership skills (Townsend, 2000; Schumacher and Swan, 1993; Birkenbolz and Schumacher, 1994). In many institutions, leadership courses or degree

programs have been developed through agricultural education to meet this need (Fritz, 2003).

In 1992, faced with the evidence that student leadership development opportunities were lacking, yet needed, and realizing there was no room for the addition of a course on leadership in the curriculum, interested faculty from the College of Agriculture at Arkansas State University developed a student leadership conference. The overall goal of the conference was to provide leadership development for current and potential leaders in the College of Agriculture. The specific goals of the conference were to:

- Help each student achieve his or her full potential
- Help each student organization have a successful year
- Develop leadership skills needed to distinguish one's self from graduates of other institutions
- Develop a sense of collegiality through networking with peer leaders

The model of a one-day conference (six to seven hours), conducted on a Saturday early in the fall semester has been the standard format. These goals and the model have remained consistent over the years, except for 1998. In that year, the conference was held at Heifer International's Heifer Ranch in Perryville, Arkansas. Students participated in the Ranch's Global Village, an overnight experience simulating the daily struggles and challenges of people living in developing countries. The Global Village experience included a leadership component dealing with team development, conflict resolution, trust, and cooperation. Although the setting and approach were different, the focus and goals of previous conferences were the same.

In 13 years, approximately 350 students have participated in this event. Except for the year of the Global Village experience, the lowest number of participants was seventeen and the highest was forty-four. Although the records are incomplete, the number of females participating varies from approximately 25% to approximately 35% each year.

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Figure 1. Logo from 13<sup>th</sup> annual Leadership Conference.

After these years of conducting conferences, some general principles begin to emerge that guide conference planners in developing a positive leadership experience. These principles have evolved from intuitive observations on the part of the leadership planning committee and from hard data gathered from the participants in those conferences. Each conference ended with the participants completing a simple conference evaluation that asked four open-ended questions. These questions included:

- What portion/topic/session of the program did you find the most useful?
- What portion/topic/session of the program was the least beneficial?
- What was not included that should have been included?
- Was any topic too long or too short? If so, which one(s)?

These open-ended responses are a little more difficult to summarize. In some cases, the responses were the name of a session title like Team Building, or Leadership Styles. During the process of summarizing responses, some less obvious but similar or equivalent responses were grouped to reflect a particular theme.

A fifth question, “How useful was the information in each portion/session of the program?” was asked for each of the sessions, the icebreaker, and the luncheon speaker. The rating options were; very useful, useful, and not useful. If fourteen people said a particular session was not useful and seven said it was useful, but no one said it was very useful, then that session would undergo a more critical review to see if this topic was inappropriate, if the presenter could have done something differently, or if the committee could have done anything that was in its power to make this a more useful experience. In

addition, participants were asked to rate the overall usefulness of the conference. The responses to all questions are tabulated on a summary sheet for review by the planning committee. In addition, from time to time program presenters have been asked informally to provide suggestions that would help the conference be of greater benefit to the students.

From these formal and informal conference evaluations, a consensus begins to develop regarding some general principles that can enhance the conference experience. The following list of “lessons learned” reflects the experience of the planners at one institution and may have application to others who wish to plan such an event at other institutions.

### Lessons Learned

Logistics of timing and location are critical starting points. Fall semester was the logical time to conduct a leadership conference, because students seem to exhibit a high level of eagerness and enthusiasm about school and organizational activities at the start of a new school year. Saturdays were chosen in preference to a weekday due to potential class schedule conflicts. Before setting a date, all available campus and personal calendars were consulted to hopefully avoid conflicts with significant campus or student events, such as a football game. The conferences were conducted early in the semester, preferably no later than the third or fourth weekend of the semester. Beyond the fourth week, students have a tendency to settle into a routine and up-coming assignments or exams begin to take priority. Furthermore, conferences held later in the semester may have less impact on what students actually do in that semester or year.

**The location was also important.** Originally the plan was to hold the event at an off-campus venue to add an element of reality by connecting the event to the real world. This also helped to differentiate the event from classes. However, logistical problems in area hotels have brought the event to the campus Convocation Center for the last four years, which has worked very well.

**Include faculty and current and former students in all stages of planning and conducting the conference.** The participation of faculty and current and/or former students in planning and conducting the conference has been very helpful. Both current and former students have served as conference presenters. Having a combination of industry and student presenters has provided a variety of useful insights about leadership. Student leaders have introduced speakers, conducted icebreakers, helped with registration, been interviewed for TV or radio, facilitated small-group activities, served as the Master of Ceremonies, served as resource persons for the various clubs, and even served as conference speakers on leadership topics. One conference participant returned five years after graduation to be the luncheon speaker.

**Aggressively invite those you want to attend.** Reliance on a single approach to develop a list of students to invite has not been as effective as desired. Nomination by student organization advisors had been the primary approach. However, advisors are generally very busy during early fall and need to be reminded to submit nominees. Advisor input is still important, but a better approach to gaining faculty input has been to target faculty members interested in leadership development and those that teach core courses containing high numbers of students from all majors. Current officers and members in the various student organizations have also helped to develop a well-rounded and complete list of nominees.

To add significance and prestige to the event, students received a formal letter of invitation from the Dean of the College of Agriculture. Mailing letters to a student's home address was effective for generating participation, probably because the parents became more aware of the invitation and encouraged participation. The letters stressed that the student had been nominated by an organization, an advisor, a teacher, or a fellow student to participate in this event, with enough detail to pique the student's interest and reinforce the importance of leadership development for future career opportunities and success. The letters also conveyed the importance of professional dress and that a news article and photo of the student would be sent to hometown newspapers. These invitations were sent by regular mail at least two weeks in advance, which usually provided ample time for students to make arrangements to attend the conference. Students were asked to RSVP so plans could be made for their attendance. Every effort was made to invite one or more members/officers from each student organization in the college. Also, the leadership committee believed it was important to balance invitations between current student leaders and the incoming freshman or transfer students with demonstrated leadership potential. Each year about 50% of the students invited, actually accepted the invitation. Of that group, a few either cancelled at the last minute or failed to appear on the day of the event. The target number of attendees was between 30 and 35.

**Set the stage for success.** The letter of invitation from the dean was designed to set a positive tone for the conference and motivate students to attend with a sense of honor for having received an invitation. At the conference, goals and objectives for the event were discussed as part of the orientation and reinforced throughout the day. Participants were told during the welcome and orientation that this was a safe environment where they could stretch and ask questions or say, "I don't understand." They were encouraged to see this as a laboratory experience where they could grow and test their abilities through the events of the day.

The conference format included an introduction and welcome from the college dean and community

sponsors when they were available to attend. The positive tone set by the dean and the community sponsors helped students grasp the significance of the day. To provide role models and inspiration for students, luncheon speakers for the conferences were alumni of the college that were leaders. A key element of the success of an event like this is to have an environment of mutual trust and appreciation for the differences of the participants. To help develop this environment, icebreaker activities were used to help students "get acquainted" with one another to reduce inhibitions to active participation. There are a number of good resources on icebreakers, both on the web and in book form, by authors such as West (1996) and Sheely (1999). Part of the objective for "getting acquainted" was also accomplished through various kinds of group or team-building activities experienced throughout the day. Beyond these goals, it was considered necessary to reinforce and reward students publicly for taking the time to develop their leadership potential. In part, this was done through a news release sent to their hometown newspapers and the presentation of a certificate. In some years, items such as coffee mugs, tee shirts or other keepsake items were given to participants.



Figure 2. Students involved in Leadership Conference.

**Develop a quality experience with relative and memorable content.** The event should be both memorable and relevant, especially if it is held on a Saturday. Almost anything can be relevant because some students seem to lack formal instruction in leadership. However, for the best use of limited time and in keeping with one of the primary goals, a focal point in our effort was to help students have a productive year in their various student organizations. Generally, in the past, more time has been spent on application and very little on theory. However, a touch of theory and principles can be a good starting point for activities if the desire is to help students understand the purpose of the activities.

Since some students attend conferences more than once, the content and presenters have varied from year to year. Topics included: conducting effective meetings, team-building, conflict resolu-



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tion, program planning, parliamentary procedure, business etiquette, budgeting, program promotion, identification of personality or leadership type/style, and total quality management. Hands-on learning activities have been a major part of each conference. More active learning experiences also meant less seat time, which helped students remain focused and interested in learning. Good speakers or presenters play a major role in the success of the event. Giving presenters the proper orientation to the event and goals of the conference helped them focus their delivery on topics that were relevant and presented in an interesting way.

**Seize the opportunity to promote students, the college and alumni.** This event has provided a wonderful opportunity for promoting the college to current students, potential students, and alumni. The event has also been productive for the college in student recruiting and with solicitation of donations from alumni. However, the first priority of the conference is always to promote student leadership development with current students. Students were encouraged in the letter of invitation to dress professionally because their pictures would be sent with a news release to their hometown newspapers. A standard news release form was included in the conference packet and both were up-dated each year. A question on the registration form asked for the name of the newspaper(s) servicing the student's hometown and the campus public relations office provided the mailing and email addresses of hometown newspapers. The university public relations office worked with the committee to make sure news releases were submitted to the appropriate newspapers for each participant. At one time, the university subscribed to a clipping service, which provided insight to the extent of press the event received, but this service was terminated several years ago. The picture sent to the newspaper offices with the news release was taken while being presented a certificate that served as documentation and recognition of the student's attendance and participation. For the tenth anniversary, coffee mugs and tee shirts were given away. The media, including local and campus newspapers, TV and radio stations are all invited to attend and cover the event. About 50% of the time media representatives attended and aired or printed a human-interest story related to the conference. Most of the media coverage was either during or after the event. Occasionally, the local newspaper published an article before the event and the TV station conducted interviews before or during the conference. Television reporters have shown a preference for interviewing presenters with some notability or name recognition, such as politicians or successful business leaders, as well as the student leaders.

**Connect the leadership conference to other college events.** A strong connection between leadership activities and individual or group rewards has been important to motivating some students. A

reward system was established through the annual college honors banquet. Awards for outstanding student members and outstanding student organizations were developed that served as a guide for individual and group activities. The leadership conference conducted activities that supported and contributed to the reward system.

**Involve alumni and share the experience with them.** Most alumni will appreciate the college's efforts to provide leadership development opportunities for students and will often support those efforts by providing assistance with funding, or by serving as a guest speaker. The newspaper releases and a college/department newsletter are excellent ways to advertise and promote the event and recognize the supporters and contributors. An annual college phone-a-thon can also provide an opportunity to highlight the events of the year that can include the leadership conference.

**Seek outside funding.** Organizing an event such as this is enough work by itself, but finding funding for the event is an added burden that has become a necessity if the event is to accomplish its purpose. The event can be very low budget, depending on where it is held, what food is provided, and if stipends are provided for speakers or presenters. Letters, certificates and mailings are usually less than \$100. Using email and digital cameras can reduce the time and costs of preparing and sending the news releases. A quality leadership conference can be held for less than \$500. In the beginning, the event was funded by the dean's office for less than \$300. Shifting the cost of meals and other supplies from the college to outside funding sources has been important to the dean and these donations have enabled the conference program to expand in ways that would not have been otherwise possible. The topic of leadership is one that agribusinesses and alumni strongly support and are willing to help fund. The first outside support came from the local Chamber of Commerce Agribusiness Committee. From there, support has continued to grow and raising \$1000 to \$1500 can now be done with very little effort. Businesses like to be associated with an event in the college and they like seeing their name in print on the program, in the news releases and on any giveaway items. The bottom line is that agribusinesses are happy to be linked to a worthwhile event like this.

**Evaluate the conference.** Evaluation is the cornerstone to improvement in any program. From the end of one conference to the planning of the next, what is remembered sometimes becomes just a vague recollection. Reviewing the evaluation summary from the previous conference was always a good starting point to planning the next conference. These evaluations helped to confirm or dispel observations and perceptions that might have been developed during the event, forming the basis for what we called the "lessons learned."

A simple one-page evaluation was used to gain the participants' perspective on the conference. Shortly after the conference these evaluations were summarized and a copy was shared with members of the committee and the dean. From this simple evaluation, improvements were made each year. Evaluation was not limited to the formal survey, but also included informal feedback from participants and presenters.

## Summary

Leadership abilities are too important to the future of a person's success to leave to chance. The leadership demonstrated by graduates in their personal or professional experience reflects upon themselves and the institution from which they graduated. The growth and reputation of colleges and other educational institutions are established only in part on the academic ability of graduates. Colleges and universities need to encourage students and faculty to support and participate in leadership development activities. A leadership conference is just one of several ways that leadership development can be encouraged. These events require some work, but the benefits are real both in the short term, while students are in college, and after college, when they become professionals. These ten lessons reflect participant evaluations of the annual conference over 13 years and, to a much lesser extent, the insights of conference presenters and planners. Events like these seldom exist in a vacuum. Involvement of faculty members, student leaders, alumni, and others in the agricultural community is vital to making this leadership event a success. However, the extent to which a leadership conference meets its goal depends on how the planners know and work within the context of their own system and how they set the stage with participants for success. Cultural norms vary across the U.S. and from institution to institution, but these lessons reflect a starting point for consideration as others join the leadership education

movement and seek to prepare positive educational experiences in leadership for their students.

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