

Leadership Characteristics and Professional Development Needs of Collegiate Student Organizations

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Abstract

Student involvement in collegiate organizations has implications for administrators, faculty advisors and students. Previous studies concluded that participation in collegiate student organizations is associated with retention and satisfaction in college; student development; increased interpersonal skills; leadership development; and development of communication, teamwork, organizational, decision making, and planning skills, in addition to developing a positive longitudinal view on volunteering and community service. This study assessed the leadership characteristics and traits of student organizations, the degree of involvement, and the professional development needs of collegiate organizations in a College of Agricultural Sciences. Participants noted the three best collegiate activities of the organizations included fundraisers and sales, participation in shows, and trips. The most frequently reported reason for joining a collegiate organization was because it related to career goals, followed by the opportunity for leadership development. Professional development needs included various statements in the categories of activities, involvement, organization, membership, and time. Results from this study provide an understanding for the leadership patterns of collegiate members, influences on involvement in the organization, and the needs of the members.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Student involvement theory focuses on what students do in their collegiate experience in relation to the level of motivation and the amount of time and energy they place in the learning process (Astin, 1984). Astin supported the term involvement rather than motivation, for he feels involvement is easier to observe than motivation and this translates to an easier construct to measure for educators. “..the theory of student involvement is more concerned with the behavioral mechanisms or processes that facilitate student development (the how of student development)” (p. 301).

Astin's theory of student involvement stems from his previous research on factors influencing students' decisions to drop out of college (1975) and several longitudinal studies on college student development (1977; 1993). He found that the most significant factors associated with retention and satisfaction in college were related to “involvement.” Students who lived on campus and were involved in fraternities, sororities or extracurricular activities were less likely to drop out of college (Astin, 1984). Faculty interaction was also strongly associated with satisfaction with college (Chickering, 1972; Astin, 1984, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Cognition (1993) and Light (2001) also noted the relationship between participation in collegiate organizations and satisfaction with college. Astin (1993) reported the top three involvement variables associated with reported student leadership growth were: hours per week in student clubs/organizations, election to an office, and giving presentations in class. The value and importance of student participation in collegiate organizations clearly has a link to student development and satisfaction with the college experience. Astin concluded, “the student's peer group is the single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years” (1993, p. 398).

In 1979, Anthony and Roberts created an integrated leadership model for higher education. This model, the Comprehensive Leadership Model, was developed to provide a holistic approach to leadership development and subsequent leadership programming on college campuses. The model contains three main components: training, education and development. Training is associated with those activities designed to improve the performance of the individual; education deals with activities that will improve leadership competence of the student; and development is designed to help the individual develop and mature in a way that will enhance his/her leadership potential (Anthony & Roberts, 1979).

Student involvement in collegiate organizations provides numerous opportunities for growth, development and maturation. Floerchinger (1998) in a review of literature found six key benefits associ-

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ated with student involvement in collegiate activities: 1) increased retention; 2) enhanced interpersonal skills; 3) positive influence on leadership, communication, teamwork, organization, decision making and planning skills; 4) greater satisfaction with their college experience; 5) useful job procurement skills and experience; and 6) lasting views on volunteering and community service. Several other authors confirmed the benefits noted by Floerchinger. Eklund-Leen and Young (1996) found community college students who were more involved in collegiate activities held a more positive attitude toward community involvement. The authors noted that "involvement in student organizations enhances the educational outcomes of the institution" (p. 79). Sommers (1991) reported that participation in collegiate leadership activities was proportional to participation in post-college leadership activities. Finally, in a meta analysis of research, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) found that college alumni reported holding leadership positions in college significantly enhanced their interpersonal and leadership skills contributing to job success.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to assess the leadership characteristics and traits of student organizations, the level and type of student participation, and the professional development needs of collegiate organizations in a College of Agricultural Sciences (CAS). Specific objectives were to:

1. Assess leadership and organizational behaviors and patterns of collegiate organizations;
2. Determine the level of involvement in collegiate organizations in relation to academic and extracurricular activities;
3. Identify factors that influence participation in collegiate organizations; and
4. Secure professional development needs of collegiate organizations.

Methods and Procedure

Questions for the study were developed by the researchers based upon the work of Eklund-Leen (1984), Hoover and Scanlon (1991), and several components of the Anthony and Roberts' (1979) Comprehensive Leadership Model. Questions addressed type, degree and level of involvement in a CAS Collegiate Student Organizations (CSO), involvement in other CSO's, time spent in employment, and leadership characteristics and organizational components of CSO's. Additional open-ended questions addressed CSO activities, suggestions for leadership and organizational improvement, and professional development activities. The survey was reviewed by a panel of students in collegiate organizations, faculty and an administrator in the College of Agricultural Sciences for face and content validity.

During fall 2002 the authors contacted advisors of Collegiate Student Organizations in the College of

Agricultural Sciences at The Pennsylvania State University to share the purpose and objectives of the study and to request a list of members. Requests yielded membership information from 17 of the college's 28 CSO's. From that pool of students (N=818), duplications were removed, and a stratified random sample of 267 students was selected to participate in the study. This sample represents a 5% sample error at the 95% confidence level (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970). Twenty-three surveys were returned due to incorrect forwarding addresses, leaving the sample size at 244. Participants were given three opportunities to respond to the mailed survey (which included a cover letter and postage-paid return envelope). Ninety-three surveys were returned yielding a response rate of 38%. Ten percent of the non-respondents were contacted and they provided responses to four selected questions. Results indicated no significant difference between three of the four variables. The one variable that showed a significant difference was not included in the study.

Findings

Objective 1. Assess leadership and organizational behaviors and patterns among collegiate organizations.

Almost all participants (96.8%) reported their CSO had a faculty advisor with approximately three-fourths (71%) reporting that that their advisor(s) was always at club meetings. Thirty-two percent of the respondents reported faculty advisors attended all officer meetings. Eighty-one percent of the participants reported their CSO held officer meetings, with 45% of the participants noting officer meetings were held the same day as the business meeting and 32% reporting holding officers meetings several days prior to the business meeting.

Members were asked questions regarding the leadership characteristics and organizational practices of their CSO. Almost three-fourths of the respondents indicated that their CSO had a mission statement (70%) and a constitution and by-laws (72%). Slightly over two-thirds (65.6%) noted their CSO's used parliamentary procedure during business meetings. Almost all the organizations developed and used an agenda for the meetings (93.5%) and slightly over one-half (57%) reported that the agenda was distributed prior to the meeting. Six of ten respondents (60.2%) reported minutes of the meetings were posted or distributed, and 85% reported having a program of activities.

When asked to identify the various components found within their program of activities, the top three most frequently reported items were: a calendar of events (91.1%), an officer list (88.6%), and member contact information (79.7%). The three most infrequently reported components were: a mission statement (49.4%); a constitution and by-laws, standing committee assignments (48.1%); and goals or objectives (48.1%).

Leadership Characteristics

Approximately three-fourths (73.1%) of the participants noted their club/organization had standing committees which provided reports at business meetings.

Objective 2. Determine the level of involvement in collegiate organizations in relation to academic and extracurricular activities.

CSO members were asked to describe their current credit and job load, semester status, collegiate responsibilities, length of membership, and levels of involvement in both the organization they were responding to, and additional collegiate organizations in which they may or may not be involved. Sixty-nine respondents indicated their current number of credit hours was between 15 and 19. Responses showed a large difference in semester standing from first year standing through graduate status. Hours spent studying per week ranged from 3 through 60 with an average of 18.2 hours. Sixty-one percent indicated they were currently employed and the time per week spent working ranged from 3 to 33 hours with an average of 13.82 hours.

Approximately 6 of 10 (61.3%) respondents noted they participated in three or less CSO's. Over half (52.8%) of the respondents spent two or less hours on collegiate organizational responsibilities per week. Fifty-nine percent of the respondents indicated they were involved in a CSO for three or fewer semesters. Responses to level of personal involvement in the organization in which they were most active indicated that 28% of the members considered themselves a member who joins committees and works, while 37% of the respondents were leaders who served as officers.

In order to secure an idea of important annual activities, CSO members responded to a question that asked, What are the three best activities or events your club conducts each year? Thirty-one responded with fundraisers and various sales of meats and cheese boxes; 30 members indicated participation in conventions, expos or conferences; 25 listed participation in livestock and dairy shows; and 18 responses noted a spring break trip or field trips.

Objective 3. Identify factors that influence participation in collegiate organizations.

Participants were asked to indicate their reasons for joining a College of Agricultural Sciences collegiate organization. The majority of participants indicated their reason for joining a collegiate organization was that it related to their career/major goals (92.4%), opportunities for leadership development (72.0%), socialization

with peers (82.8%), and affiliation with others who share similar interests (69.9%). The four most infrequently reported reasons for joining a CSO were professional development (48.4%), to achieve/accomplish goals of a group (48.4%), opportunities for scholarship (41.9%), and opportunities for recognition (39.8%).

Objective 4. Secure professional development needs of collegiate organizations

Students were asked the question "If you were to change three things about your club what would they be?" Following the recommendations of Miles and Huberman (1994) common themes were established and responses were sorted into the following categories: Activities, Involvement, Organization, Membership, and Time (Table 1). Respondents were concerned with the type and scope of activities provided to members. Responses were split between more social opportunities and more educational or higher caliber activities. Involvement ranged from increasing participation/involvement from members, faculty, and with other majors in the college. From an organizational perspective, members were interested in improving communication by improving the CSO web site, developing a program of activities, publicizing activities, and establishing better organized meetings. Several membership issues were noted, such as retaining new members, increasing membership, member participation, and recruiting more diverse members. Issues related to time included diversifying the time and day of meetings. The categories of officers, money, attendance and committee structure had less than six responses and were not included in Table 1.

Table 1. What three things would you change about your club? (n=93)

Category	Number of responses	Suggested changes
Activities	22	-More social activities (12) -Fewer activities, but higher caliber (4) -More fun events, more social opportunities (3) -More educational and hands on activities (3)
Involvement	19	-More total involvement (9) -More involvement with the college (3) -Get more involvement from other majors (2) -Faculty involvement (1) -Increase number of people that help with activities (5)
Organization	20	-More professional and useful website (2) -Have more systematic voting (1) -Better organization during meetings (13) -Publicize club and activities more (2) -Utilize a program of activities (1) -Create a mission and vision statement (1)
Membership	17	-Keep more new members coming back (3) -Increase membership (9) -Increase participation of members (3) -More diverse members (1) -Retain more members (1)
Time	7	-Time of meetings (3) -Day of meeting (1) -Time better spent (3)

Finally, members were asked to provide suggestions for leadership workshops or seminars that would help enhance the effectiveness of their club/organization. Responses included: increasing participation from members (9); how to run an effective meeting (5); how to organize committees (4); appropriate dissemination of club information, such as parliamentary procedure, developing and amending a constitution and by-laws (4), effective communication skills (2); and team building for officers/members (1).

Conclusions/Implications

The results of this study have professional development and student leadership development implications for college administrators, faculty advisors and students.

Findings support the literature related to student leadership development and the value and rationale for participating in collegiate organizations.

In this study the top four reasons reported for joining a collegiate organization were: the CSO related to their career/major goals, provided opportunities for leadership development, allowed for socialization with peers, and provided affiliation with others who share similar interests. These reasons provide students' the opportunity to develop both professionally and personally during their collegiate experience. This study affirms the work of Astin (1993) who noted the most important factors associated with a positive perception of college life were the opportunity to positively interact with faculty and peers.

Professional development opportunities exist for faculty advisors and student members to increase the efficiency and enhancement of leadership skills, behaviors and attitudes. Gentul (1998) noted that student leaders can be more effective when provided with appropriate training and guidance. Responses related to professional development needs reflected some basic yet critical leadership knowledge, behaviors and skills, such as organization, communication, member recruitment and retention, increasing involvement, engaging members and team building. These suggestions will form the basis for professional development programs offered to College of Agricultural Sciences' collegiate organizations (student members, officers and faculty advisors) over the next several academic years.

Congetta (1993) reported that social interaction is an important part of student success. "The number and type of formal and informal groups, organizations and activities to which a student belongs or participates in will contribute to the students' feeling a sense of belonging to the institution" (p. 43). Congetta also noted that students involved in extracurricular activities reported greater satisfaction with college services and the college environ-

ment, and were more likely to "re-enroll" in the same college. Sommers (1991) also found a positive relationship between involvement in collegiate leadership activities and involvement in post-college leadership activities. These factors are critical to the recruitment and retention of future students into a College of Agricultural Sciences, garnering support of alumni, and preparing future leaders in the food, agricultural and natural resource sciences.

Recommendations

Results of this study can be used as a basis for additional research with CSOs in Colleges of Agricultural Sciences and in the professional development of student leaders and advisors. For example, one way to raise awareness, recognize and reinforce leadership development and related activities is to showcase club accomplishments and activities at the college level. The Agricultural Student Council at The Pennsylvania University recently adopted a "College of Agricultural Sciences Club of the Year Award" to recognize excellence in professional development, leadership, service and educational activities. Several other Colleges of Agricultural Sciences recognize their CSOs for similar achievements and accomplishments. Additionally, many CSOs participate in regional and national competition unique to their profession or industry group. Participation in these events needs to be encouraged and recognized. In regards to this study, the recommendations are as follows:

1. Provide professional development opportunities for CSO leaders/members in the following areas: developing a program of activities, increasing participation for members, and facilitating effective meeting management.
2. Support and promote interaction between CSO and related industries in the food, agricultural and natural resources to increase communication and support for the development of leadership related skills and experiences.
3. Strengthen the role and status of College of Agricultural Sciences Student Councils or Governing Boards to meet the leadership and professional development needs of CSO members.

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