

# The Student Success Leader Program: College-Level Service Enhances Learning outside the Classroom

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## Abstract

The Student Success Leader program focuses on informal education of a select group of agriculture students through service to the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Oklahoma State University. The Student Success Leaders are a student peer leadership program comprised of three units: Ambassadors, Career Liaisons, and Student Academic Mentors. Student Success Leaders participate in recruitment and career development activities and serve as peer mentors to students throughout the college. The purpose of this article is to share program details and results to date with educators. Specifically, the authors explore informal education through active participation in college-level service-activities. Results to date have shown that participation in the Student Success Leader program has impacted the personal development and growth of student participants and influenced student interest in future leadership and service roles.

## Introduction

Studies have shown that engagement with college resources has a significant influence on the differential blueprint of student learning and growth (Pace, 1980; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Smart et al., 2000; Thompson, 2001, 2003). The College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources' Student Success Leader Program at Oklahoma State University fosters student learning and growth through active student participation in college-wide service activities. Research suggests that students with leadership experiences, involving holding an office, responsibility of a position, or active membership within extracurricular organizations, are all directly proportional to the richness and magnitude of learning experiences, as well as to their personal development during college years (Astin, 1985).

The development of students as leaders is and will remain a common goal for institutions of higher education (Pennington, 2005). Numerous researchers have examined student involvement within leadership programs built on formal structure. These researchers found significant growth in participants across leadership skills and several leadership-related measures including civic responsibility,

multicultural awareness, understanding of leadership theory, and personal and societal values (Cress et al., 2001). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) indicated that students can and do increase their leadership skills throughout their college years. That increase can be attributed at least in part to collegiate involvement (Astin, 1993). The College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Oklahoma State University seeks to develop students as leaders not only through the formal classroom (Pennington and Weeks, 2006) but also through learning environments outside the classroom such as the Student Success Leader Program. This paper describes the Student Success Leader Program. Program details are shared as well as results to date and the impact of active participation in college-level service activities on student growth and development.

## The Student Success Leader Program

The Student Success Leader (SSL) Program is comprised of agriculture students that serve as an extension of the staff and faculty of the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources at Oklahoma State University. The goal of the Student Success Leader program is two-fold: (1) provide an educational opportunity beyond the classroom for select students in the college to develop as student leaders and (2) serve the college's broader student population through service activities.

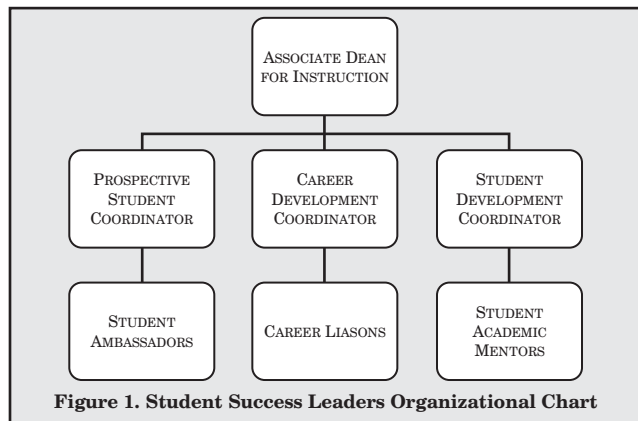
Approximately 30 undergraduate Student Success Leaders (SSLs) are selected annually to serve the college's approximately 2000 students. The pre-selection process in which prospective SSLs participate includes: three training sessions, an application, and a networking reception. If students complete the pre-selection process they are then eligible to be considered for a personal interview. The interview serves as the final selection criteria for a Student Success Leader position.

Agriculture students participating in the SSL Program serve in one of three different roles: Student Ambassador, Career Liaison or Student Academic Mentor. The three branches of service work in connection with one another but also have independent goals. These goals include helping recruit prospective students to the college, working to assist

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current students with future career related plans, and aiding current students with the adjustment from high school to college, respectively. Each of the three branches of the Student Success Leader program is advised by a full-time coordinator and a graduate assistant employed by the college. The coordinators report to the Associate Dean of Instruction for the college (Figure 1).



### Ambassadors

The Ambassadors role for the college centers on recruiting new students to the college. These students assist high school and junior college students when contemplating future degree programs and academic and extracurricular activities. They serve as an extension of the Prospective Student Coordinator. Typically, this group consists of 12 to 15 student leaders each year. The primary function of students in this role is to promote the college and university.

Ambassadors meet with prospective students and their families. They answer questions about the college and university, provide information about potential majors and options, give campus tours and act as a student point of contact for prospective students. Ambassadors are also responsible for planning and implementing college-level recruiting events including Fall Conference and Call Night. Fall Conference is a weekend leadership conference hosting approximately 50 prospective high school students and Call Night is an event in which the Ambassadors make personal phone calls to prospective students.

### Career Liaisons

The Career Liaison serves as an extension of the Career Development Coordinator of the college. This group generally consists of six to eight student leaders each year. These student leaders assist freshmen to seniors, as well as alumni, as they explore career related opportunities and options. Career Liaisons also aid students in their search for internships and career related jobs. This group also promotes the college and university at different career events.

Specific activities of student Career Liaisons include: (a) assisting with the fall and spring college-level career fair through preparation work, event set-up, employer and fellow student support; (b) aiding other students with career related materials including resume critiques, cover letter writing, internship and job searches; and, (c) presenting workshops to clubs and organizations about interviewing, writing resumes and cover letters, professional dress, and dining etiquette.

### Student Academic Mentors

The Student Academic Mentors (SAMs) play a vital role for the Student Development Coordinator. The SAMs typically consists of five student leaders. These particular students live with incoming freshmen in the colleges' living-learning environment acting as mentors for a year. They offer an additional support system, beyond the assigned residential advisors, for those freshmen while they adjust from high school to college. These students are on duty for their peers at all times. They promote the resources and activities that the college and university have to offer.

Major activities of SAMs include: (a) daily interaction with freshmen as a living-learning mentor; (b) providing college and university resource information to the freshmen class; and, (c) acting as role models specifically working to get the freshmen actively involved in campus student leadership opportunities.

### Results to Date and Discussion

The Student Success Leader program has grown and evolved in the last ten years. The Ambassador program was created first and the overall goal of recruitment has remained since its inception. The SAMs program was established in 2000 and the Career Liaison program was established the following year. The most notable change in the last few years has been the merging of the three programs into one body, The Student Success Leaders (SSLs). Although the three groups continue to maintain independent goals, as a whole the SSLs share the larger common goal of service to all agriculture students in the college. Additionally, the goal of developing students as leaders is consistent across the three groups.

Creating an umbrella organization has served the three groups positively in several ways. First, it allows for a more efficient use of resources, not only related to finances but time. For example, rather than conducting training sessions for three separate groups, a single leadership retreat can serve the entire group. Second, the groups are collaborative in nature. The group as a whole participates in campus-wide events such as Ag Week and Homecoming Week as well as community service activities. And finally, organizational stability is impacted positively as

## The Student Success

students progress from one group to the next from year to year.

To provide objective feedback regarding the SSL program and the specific impact of the program on the students participating as SSLs, a formal evaluation was conducted during the spring semester of 2009. An online survey was used to gather anonymous information from current and past SSLs. Specifically; the Student Success Leaders from 2007 to 2008 and 2008 to 2009 academic years were emailed a request to fill out a survey addressing the overall Student Success Leader program.

In general, the Student Success Leader program had a positive impact on the students completing the survey. When asked what areas of the program were most positive, students reported the following: (1) networking with employers, faculty and staff, (2) the opportunity to assist their peers through service activities, and (3) experiencing a leadership role. When asking students what areas of the program could be improved there were a few comments that addressed relationship challenges and frustrations specifically describing a need for improved relations between advisors and student participants.

The majority of the students that responded to the survey reported that being involved with the Student Success Leaders had a major impact on their leadership, service and personal growth. Eighty percent of respondents stated that involvement in service activities for their peers had a moderate to major impact on them as a Student Success Leader. Three quarters of the students stated that their involvement with the Student Success Leader program had at least moderately impacted their future leadership and service roles or involvement.

## Summary

Bringing together students who have common service and leadership goals serves as a productive way to extend college services to the student population while enhancing learning opportunities for student participants. Not only do these students provide time, service and leadership to the college and their peers, they also gain on a personal level. Student participants report that they are continually exposed to a high number of quality interactions with faculty, staff, alumni, employers, and other individuals. Student participants also agree that participation in the Student Success Leader Program has positively impacted their personal growth and development as a student leader, as well as their interest in future leadership positions and service to others.

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