

Student Paper Abstract:

Leadership and Learning:
A Look at American University Undergraduate Students

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Objective:

The objective of this study is to determine the immediate impact of leadership activities on undergraduate students at American University. While academics are the ostensible focus of college, much more than just the classroom experience impacts learning. This study addresses the education that takes place out of the classroom; specifically, the author seeks to discover the extent of change patterns of students while at college and the effect of leadership roles and development on college students.

Toutkoushian and Smart's (2001) study on the impact of institutional characteristics on college students indicates that students recognize that there is more to learn in college than academic information. Within the past 40 years, studies on college impact have moved to reflect this wide source of learning. The impact of out-of-class experiences on the college student has been documented in studies on the changes of college students (Nichols, 1967; Astin, 1968, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). Gradually, studies began relating leadership experiences with competencies (Kuh, 1993). Kuh discusses the effects of leadership roles in extracurricular activities and finds that they affect the personal development areas of Practical Competence and Altruism and Estheticism.

A more specialized group of literature examines the specific impact of leadership roles on the development of college students. Positive career impacts, socialization impacts, and others are all extrapolated within this class of research (Cooper, Healy and Simpson, 1994; Pascarella, Ethington and Smart, 1988; Kezar and Moriarty, 2000; Terenzini, Pascarella and Blimling, 1996). Cooper, Healy, and Simpson (1994) noted that the differences between involved and uninvolved students over time became more pronounced, indicating that leadership roles and developmental skills are closely interrelated. Further, the impact of specific leadership development activities on the self-perceived leadership abilities is clear. Kuh, Schuh, and Whitt's (1991) book about colleges that successfully involve their students contributes to the idea that development in college is enhanced by leadership opportunities, which can be structured by colleges for maximum impact. The increasing amount of research regarding student development in college indicates that the idea of working with students to develop the whole person, instead of just the academic facet, is becoming increasingly accepted.

Data Sources and Modes of Inquiry:

While many studies of the impact of college on students focus on quantifiable variables (c.f. Cooper, Healy and Simpson, 1994; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991; Kezar and Moriarty, 2000), the predetermined questions and answer categories, as Kuh asserts (1993), disregard the many different levels of meaning that students associate with their experiences in college. Rather, as Bogden and

Biklen note, “Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations... [The emphasis] is the subjective aspects of people’s behavior. They attempt to gain entry into the conceptual world of their subjects in order to understand how and what meaning they construct around events in their daily lives” (1998, p. 23). As Kuh continues, “the bulk of qualitative research about college students was conducted 25 years ago with traditional-age (18-22) students enrolled full time who lived on campus...Through the use of [semi-structured] interviews, we may be able to discover those aspects of college considered important by students whose frames of reference were not taken into account when many of the current research instruments and models of college impact were developed” (1993, p. 279).

To study the impact of college leadership development opportunities on students, interviews with 40 students, 10 student affairs professionals, and 10 professors at American University, a college that has a strong history of student involvement but that does not currently incorporate a formal, campus-wide leadership development program, were conducted. Because this study was concerned not with generalized results, but rather with a picture of the immediate impact of leadership experiences on American University students, the researcher chose to interview the students, themselves, and also individuals with whom these students worked, to see the links between involvement and perceptions of changes and development through a variety of lenses. Additionally, the uniqueness of campus climates means that leadership development activities

and impacts are also unique (Outcalt *et al*, 2001). In the tradition of Whitt (1994), Outcalt *et al* (2001), Kezar and Moriarty (2000) and others, the students selected for the interviews included some known campus leaders and other students who would be considered to be “involved” in activities, including volunteer work, but who would not necessarily be as widely known across campus. Student affairs staff members at various levels were also interviewed to gain a longer-term perspective on the impact of leadership roles on the students.

After completion, these semi-structured interviews will be coded according to categories developed through the interviews.

Results:

Preliminary findings based on interviews with students and student affairs staff members suggest that, as students gain leadership experience on campus, they also gain the ability to reflect their opinions coherently and with respect for the opinions of others. Most importantly, they gain the knowledge that “it is okay to fail.” The differing perspectives within the realm of student affairs staff enabled the researcher to see the broad impact of leadership development, and, indeed, the broad venues for it, as well. Like the research, the interviews indicated that this is no easy field to research or discuss – many differing needs and perspectives mean that the impact of leadership development will also differ across individuals. At the same time, much of what they said in the interviews echoes the premise of the bulk of the research – that the effects of leadership roles for col-

lege students are wide-ranging, and contribute much to the development of students.

Educational Importance of the Study:

The implications of this study regarding leadership development for college students are wide-ranging. The large impact of leadership roles and leadership development on students means that, as university community members, we must work to ensure that we encourage and facilitate leadership roles for the students with whom we work. This means that we must be aware of “best practices” across universities, and also of ineffective leadership paradigms. Because no two universities are entirely alike, elements of leadership development that are successful in one setting may not necessarily be best for another, so constant re-evaluation of leadership development programs is necessary.

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