Leadership Development in College Students

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Leadership development in students is considered a priority at contemporary institutions of higher education (Astin & Astin, 2000; Boatman, 1999; Roberts, 2003b). Leadership can include how a student serves an institution of higher education and how individuals perceive themselves in the context of greater society. Contemporary colleges and universities provide numerous leadership opportunities for students. These formal and informal leadership development activities can include in-class and out-of-class experiences (Boatman, 1999; King, 2003).

The purpose of the current study was to describe how postsecondary institutions from a variety of typologies develop student leaders. Leadership, in the study, was specifically focused on student government bodies. Specifically, the study sought to identify how postsecondary institutions can work as a collective of officers and agencies to enhance effective leadership skills. Presidents of student government associations at 13 institutions were interviewed.

Background of the Study

Leadership education has been found to have a positive effect on students' character development (Astin & Antonio, 2004) and values (Cress, Astin, Burkhardt, & Zimmerman-Oster, 2001). Colleges and universities have demonstrated a commitment to educating students to be responsible citizens (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2006; Roberts, 2003a; Thelin, 2003). Institutions of higher education have established leadership development programs, as well as service and volunteer initiatives, as a way to address a lack of interest in civic activities (Astin & Antonio, 2004) and to engage students in the institution. Participating in leadership development programming can be linked to how students make moral and ethical decisions (Astin & Antonio, 2004).

Leadership development opportunities can be found in student activities (Astin, 1993; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 1998; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005), clubs and organizations, classes (Boatman, 1999), and community service (Arnold & Welch, 2007). Students can serve as leaders in a variety of contexts, including residence halls, fraternities and sororities, student organizations, student governance bodies (Bosco, Downey, & Overholtzer, 1987; DeJulio, Larson, Dever, & Paulman, 1981; Posner & Brodsky, 1992, 1993, 1994), and orientation (Posner & Rosenberger, 1997). Regardless of organization, serving in leadership roles allows students to interact with others and to develop new skills.

When examining how effectively higher education is preparing individuals to serve as leaders, elements such as interests, participation, and leadership styles have been considered (Renn & Lytle, 2010). Involvement in leadership activities has a positive effect on students representing different identity groups, including race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender (Arminio et al., 2000; Harper & Quaye, 2007; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Renn, 2007). For example, Renn and
Lytle (2010) found that women pursued leadership opportunities on campus in order to develop new skills, increase their self-confidence and improve their communities.

Leadership training programs are becoming more and more prevalent at contemporary institutions of higher education. Participating in formal leadership training programs can help students learn to think critically and to communicate effectively. These skills can assist students in their personal and professional lives (King, 2003). Leadership development programs can be designed comprehensively. Those types of programs are not isolated programs or initiatives. Rather, comprehensive programs begin with the institution's mission and include many student sub-populations, methods, and objectives (Roberts, 2003a).

Methodology

In this qualitative study, 13 students were interviewed. All students were serving as presidents of their institution's student governance bodies at the time of the interview. Students represented a wide range of institutions, including regional institutions, a faith-based college, a women's college, a research institution, and community colleges.

Interviews were conducted in the fall of 2009 and the spring of 2010. Interviews were held at on-campus and off-campus locations selected by the students. Students were asked to describe their experiences as student leaders. The survey questions, reported by Miles (in press a), allowed students to reflect on their roles as student leaders, including their interactions with the campus community. Interviews were audio-taped and field notes were taken. Data was analyzed manually. During data analysis, three themes emerged. The themes included change, organizational responsibility, and cultivating leadership.

Findings

The first theme identified was change. Students all reported excitement at the idea of creating changes and bringing new ideas to campus. In the words of one student, "If it's legitimate, we act on it."

Students expressed that their student governments' relationships with campus offices and administrators have changed. The student governments were affected by changes in campus leadership and approaches to student development. For example, one student described how having a new chancellor on campus has changed the student government. The chancellor created a new tradition in which the student government is invited to his home once a year to discuss students' concerns. Another student government president described how student government interactions with student affairs have changed:

We had a horrible relationship with Student Affairs in the past. It's much better now. The advising staff had their own ideas of what the students should be doing. There was no communication with students about what they wanted. There was a battle. Now we have a wonderful relationship with our advisors.
Another institution is revising the student government constitution so that all officers' responsibilities are outlined. The organization is reviewing other institutions' student government constitutions in order to get ideas of what could be included. Additionally, the organization is moving elections to earlier in the year so officers can be in place earlier and smoother transitions can occur. The changes were initiated to address confusion regarding officer responsibilities.

The second theme identified was organizational responsibility. The students took the responsibility of leading student government seriously. They wanted to serve the student body and they understood that student government was responsible for bringing students' concerns forward. Students took the idea of working on behalf of her fellow students into their presidencies. According to one student, "I was going to do what the students wanted. That's what got me elected. I wasn't going to take no for an answer."

Several students spent the summer before they assumed office preparing to lead student government. They engaged in activities such as meeting with advisors, designing new student government logos, and revising the student government websites. A student indicated the importance of preparing for the year because she wanted to create ways for other students to see what student government was doing. She shared that "People don't always realize what SGA does. It's a behind the scenes thing."

Another student acknowledged that he felt student government was a high profile organization and he took that seriously. The student said that "SGA here is appreciated. It's not just another organization. It's a well-honored organization. It's an honor to be president." He came to that conclusion based on conversations with faculty and administrators who approached him about the organization.

The idea of civic responsibility and community service was important to several of the presidents. They wanted students to be involved with the community and understand the importance of service. A president stated the role of service by saying that the "... majority of focus this year is on civic engagement."

Students worked to make student government a transparent organization. One president made sure minutes of student government meetings were sent out to all students, faculty, and staff on campus after each meeting. People on campus who received the minutes responded with corrections or comments. The student said that she wants to be open with the campus community about what student government is doing because "They need a sense of trust and understanding."

The students wanted all student government members to represent the organization to the campus. They worked to educate all members so that consistent information was being shared with the student body. One student explained the importance of sending a consistent message by saying "Make sure your SGA understands the brand and is loyal to the brand."
The third and final theme is related to cultivating leadership. The students described feeling a sense of responsibility for helping others develop their leadership skills and to take the initiative and lead. The student leaders wanted other students to feel that they could become involved and participate in student government and in the institution.

Students expressed the importance of building relationships with, and creating opportunities for, other students. One president contacted his opponent as soon as he learned he won the office of president. He told her she did well and he wanted to include her in the student government. He then appointed her to a position in his administration. The student felt it was important to demonstrate his character.

One student described one of his weaknesses as doing too much on his own. He acknowledged the need to delegate more responsibilities and to let his fellow student government members do more of the work. He said that "I need to entrust them more. I like to micromanage them. I need to empower them to be leaders as well."

Students appreciated the officers and representatives of the student government. They saw commitment and enthusiasm in their students. One student gave his fellow students credit by saying that the "People I have are so dedicated to the cause and what's important." He went on to explain that "I often go to people I've appointed for advice" and "Having people on your side helps."

Another student says she sees leadership as "Always giving encouragement and listening and giving credit where credit is due." The presidents indicated they enjoyed working with students. They wanted to motivate others.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

The purpose of the current study was to describe how institutions of higher education develop student leaders. The three themes identified included change, organizational responsibility, and cultivating leadership. The students interviewed in this study wanted to initiate change. They viewed change as positive and necessary. The student government presidents also felt a strong sense of organizational responsibility. They saw that they were responsible for representing their organizations and that their student governments were obligated to support their institutions and their students. Finally, the students wanted to create leadership opportunities for their fellow students and they wanted others to feel involved.

The participating students appreciated the opportunities student government allowed them. A student observed that "If I wasn't in SGA, I wouldn't have these opportunities." The challenge is in creating those opportunities for all students and in different areas of higher education. The current study focused on student leaders of student governance bodies. The students indicated positive feelings regarding serving as leaders and being part of the change process. Student government members who did not have leadership roles, however, may have responded
differently and may have had different opinions regarding leadership. Also, student leaders of other student organizations may have responded differently.

Leadership and management can be perceived as different concepts in academia. Leadership has been described as inspiring others and creating change, while management has been identified as organizing and controlling existing mechanisms (McCaffery, 2010). The students interviewed in this study wanted to excel in both areas. They wanted to inspire and motivate others, allowing their organizations to evolve and grow. At the same time, they wanted to understand the control mechanisms in place and to operate efficiently.

Systems must be in place in order to help students achieve. Contemporary institutions of higher education need to determine the needs and interests of their current student populations and to address those needs. Student leaders are affected by their interactions with administrators and advisors (Miles, in press b). Individuals, however, cannot be responsible for sustaining growth and innovation in student programs and development. If individual advisors or administrators are responsible, students and student organizations may succeed or fail based on the commitment of those specific individuals. Instead, institutions as a whole must become active in developing leadership skills in the student body. Systems must be built in order to support student growth. One area or department cannot be responsible. Rather, the institution must be constructed in such a way that leadership development can occur in all student interactions, whether academic or co-curricular in nature.

The development of leadership skills is considered a desirable outcome of a college education. Institutions must decide what exactly their goals are for students. If they are trying to build an educated citizenry, they must determine what needs to happen during the years in college. The students interviewed in this study wanted to contribute to the community as engaged citizens. One student expressed that being part of the student government is "...my form of community service." If colleges and universities want students to emerge from the college years as involved citizens and strong leaders, the mission of educating leaders must be built into all aspects of an institution.

Conclusion

If individuals such as chancellors, provosts, and vice-presidents envision leadership development as a goal for their students, leadership development opportunities must be included in all areas of an institution. The institution as a whole must be responsible, as opposed to certain staff members or advisors shouldering that responsibility. In order for students to process their experiences and develop their personal leadership skills, they need to understand that the activities are opportunities to strengthen their leadership skills (Boatman, 1999). Initiatives can only be effective when activities are intentional and goals are clear.
References


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