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Developing a Student Employee Leadership Program: The Importance of Evaluating Effectiveness

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Abstract

Outstanding student employees are essential for campus recreation programs to achieve organizational goals. To that end, this study examined the effectiveness of a leadership development program in which three groups of Rec Sports student employees participated at various levels in the following: on-campus training, an off-site retreat, a scavenger hunt, and bi-weekly meetings. Using a quasi-experimental design, data were collected in two phases from 51 students and measured the growth of each student's leadership capabilities using the *Student Leadership Practices Inventory*. Statistical analyses revealed that group membership did significantly affect growth in the student's leadership capacity, $F(2, 48) = 7.07$, p = .002, $\eta^2 = .228$. The results of this study reveal that Rec Sports professionals can impact the development of student leaders. Specifically, the findings point to the value of using a sustained rather than a *one-off* approach to leadership training. Implications for research and practice are presented.

Keywords: assessment; campus recreation; rec sports; student development; training

Developing a Student Employee Leadership Program:
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A student development philosophy, the belief that student engagement impacts growth, progress, or development of the whole person (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010), guides the daily activities and practices of many campus recreation (Rec Sports) professionals. Furthermore, many Rec Sports professionals contend their programs help fulfill the university mission by providing challenging, yet supportive experiences, wherein students can realize their full potential. They consider student employment an important facet of that charge. To that end, Rec Sports professionals espouse that on-campus student employment is among the most effective methods to provide extracurricular learning (Pack, Jordan, Turner, & Haines, 2007; Schuh, 1999). The belief that through employment with Rec Sports students can develop in ways not possible but for their service permeates the profession (Frigo, 1997). Work in Rec Sports affords unique student employment opportunities because it requires significant interaction with multiple constituents. With aquatics (lifeguarding), intramural and club sports (programming, officiating), facilities and event management (customer service, risk management), fitness classes (teaching), and outdoor recreation (leading trips), Rec Sports is a figurative goldmine of leadership development opportunities.

Employment on college campuses also affords opportunities to develop leadership capacities through management and mentorship of other student employees. This valuable opportunity for university students to develop leadership skills, which can be taken to their careers and graduate school, is often emphasized during Rec Sports employment. Recognizing the value of training in realization of the leadership development goal many Rec Sports departments conduct leadership programs, ranging

from short seminars to extended yearlong programs, for student employees. Leadership development of student employees is important to ensure Rec Sports programs accomplish organizational goals of providing high-quality programs and services. Offering such programs, however, has many associated costs. The current climate for educational institutions involves difficult economic choices. Consequently, departments receiving finite university funds are increasingly held accountable for demonstrating relevance and effectiveness in meeting students' needs.

In an effort to substantiate program legitimacy, Rec Sports professionals regularly report usage and participation numbers, missing the opportunity to tell the full story. Indeed, those participation statistics are frequently the sole indicator used to justify that recreation programs and services are meeting the needs of the university community. The logic flows; if students were not satisfied, they would stop participating. While that rationale might once have been good enough, there has been a paradigm shift on college campuses. Rec Sports professionals are being required to provide more than anecdotal evidence (i.e. straightforward participation numbers) to justify budgetary support. The push is to provide concrete assessment data to validate the continued existence of programs and services. Unfortunately, formal assessment is one thing Rec Sports professionals have not traditionally done well (Carr & Hardin, 2010; Haines, 2010). Particularly problematic is the inability to detail how training and leadership programs facilitate student employee development.

While a wide range of extant literature focuses on Rec Sports student employees (Faircloth & Cooper, 2007; Griffith, Walker, & Collins, 2011; Haines & Fortman, 2008; Kearney & Tingle, 1998; Kellison & James, 2011; Pack et al., 2007; Schuh, 1999;

Turner, Jordan, & Dubord, 2005), there has been limited research which specifically

focuses on development of leadership competencies among those students (Sicilia &

Spacht, 1990; Toperzer, Anderson, & Barcelona, 2011). There has, however, been

substantive exploration of leadership amongst college students. As such, the article shifts

to an overview of studies which explored leadership development that might inform

practice for Rec Sports professionals.

      Hall, Forrester, and Borsz' (2008) constructivist case study with 21 Rec Sports

student leaders, revealed seven areas which were enhanced by assuming an on-campus

leadership role. The areas of development included: organizing, planning, and delegating;

balancing multiple roles; mentoring other students; decision-making; communication

skills; and giving and receiving feedback. Toperzer et al. (2011) examined the role and

delivery of leadership skills in campus recreational programs. Their study revealed the

five most important elements of student development were: leadership opportunities,

performance assessment, training and orientation, personal relationships, and professional

development. Scharff (2009) explored effective methods of instilling lasting leadership

skills in university students. He created extra-curricular opportunities, which served as a

living laboratory by establishing a controlled environment to evaluate platforms thought

to deliver student leadership development. Through examination of a service learning

project, Scharff (2009) found that student participants met or exceeded expectations on

all leadership objectives.

      While many of the above studies go beyond the *great man* theories and as such,

can be beneficial to developing programs to train university students, the authors identify

another model as the most accessible both for student employees and Rec Sports

professionals. Kouzes and Posner (1995, 2003, 2007, 2008) found that at its heart, leadership is the art of influencing others. Furthermore, they concluded that extraordinary leaders are characterized by their actions. Those actions, labeled as practices include: modeling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart. They assert those five practices can be learned and developed. The model has been used to explore the effectiveness of student leaders in many areas of campus life.

Posner and Rosenberger (1997) found that student orientation advisors were more effective, as perceived by advisees, when operating using the five practices. Additionally, fraternity and sorority leaders who self-rated as effective, more likely engaged in the five practices than those rating themselves as less effective (Adams & Keim, 2000; Posner & Brodsky, 1994). Other studies exploring the five practices revealed significant differences between the following: successful and unsuccessful residence hall advisors (Levy 1995; Posner & Brodsky, 1993); student government leaders (Komives, 1994); effective and ineffective athletic team captains (Grandzol, Perlis, & Draina, 2010); and perceptions of leadership learning among undergraduate business students (Allen, 2009). Consequently, the five practices provide a strong underpinning for Rec Sports professionals who desire to affect student development. Though the value of leadership training is recognized through myriad leadership studies, a dearth of research has examined the effects of leadership development in Rec Sports student employees.

Conducting comprehensive programmatic evaluation is important for many reasons. Formal assessment will both ensure high-quality programs and also demonstrate the Rec Sports profession values continuing education and reflection. Perhaps an

effective way to build research capacity in the profession (Haines & Fortman, 2007), is for early mentors to exemplify that formal assessment is an important aspect of professional life. According to Boulmetis and Dutwin (2005) measuring some combination of effectiveness, impact, and efficiency needs to be at the heart of any formal evaluation. Stated another way, the "ultimate interest is in decision making: to continue the [program] as it is, to make certain modifications, to revise completely, and even abandon it . . ." (Astin, 1993, p. 24).

It is incumbent upon Rec Sports professionals to conduct thorough, well-defined programmatic assessments to ascertain if student development is in fact occurring (Astin, 1993). Unless satisfied with simply *feeling like* they make a difference, conducting program evaluations is exceedingly important (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Unmistakably, Rec Sports departments need to better assess existing programs, services, and training (Haines & Fortman, 2007). Heeding that call, the purpose of this study is to assess the effectiveness of a student leadership training curriculum for Rec Sports student employees at one National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association (NIRSA) campus. Specifically, this study will address the following research questions:

1. Do student employees show significant improvement in their leadership capacity as a result of working for the recreational sports department?

2. Are there any significant differences in leadership development among the three student employee groups with respect to the complexity and depth of training received?

Method

Program Description

Using the philosophies espoused by Kouzes and Posner, the Student Leadership

Retreat and Training (SLRT) program was developed for the Rec Sports staff of a small,

liberal arts university in the Southwestern United States (U.S.) The SLRT involved

students from numerous employee groups. Based upon job status rather than job title,

students were placed into one of three groups identified as: *mentors*, *mid-level*

supervisors, and *new hires*. Additionally, student workers were placed into mentor teams,

consisting of one *mentor*, two or three *mid-level supervisors,* and two or three *new hires*.

See Table 1 for a brief description of SLRT activities and each group's level of

involvement.

[Insert Table 1 here]

A quasi-experimental design was used to uncover the impact of the student

leadership training program. To facilitate data collection, students, as described

previously, were placed into one of three groups. *Mentors* (full treatment group) received

the full complement of leadership training, *mid-level supervisors* (partial treatment

group) received some leadership training, and *new hires* (control group) received almost

no direct leadership training.

Instrument

An electronic version of the *Student Leadership Practices Inventory* (SLPI)

(Kouzes & Posner, 2003) was used to assess the rate of leadership development. A

psychometrically sound instrument (Kouzes & Posner, 2008), the SLPI is a 30-item

inventory that measures the five leadership practices (model the way, inspire a shared

vision, challenge the process, enable others to act, and encourage the heart). Participants

respond to each item using a five point continuum: 1 represents "I rarely or seldom

engage in the described behavior," while 5 represents "I very frequently or almost always engage in the described behavior." See Table 2 for a sample of response items. In an effort to mitigate potential testing bias, material from *The Leadership Challenge* was intentionally not utilized in the bi-weekly meetings described in Table 1.

[Insert Table 2 here]

Participants

The SLPI was administered to student employees in the Rec Sports department at a small, private liberal arts university located in the Southwestern U.S. A total of 52 part-time student employees working for aquatics, facilities, intramural sports, and outdoor recreation began the inventory. One student did not complete Phase II, which resulted in a total of 51 usable responses. See Table 3 for the sample's demographic characteristics.

[Insert Table 3 here]

Data Collection

After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), data were collected over two academic years. It is important to note that the student employees in the three groups were different each year. Doing so allowed for a larger sample of each group. Furthermore, to prevent testing bias none of the students participating in the year one data collection were included in the year two sample.

In each academic year, data were collected in two phases. For Phase I (pre-test), students completed the SLPI 30-minutes before the on-site training was scheduled to begin. A sufficient number of computers were provided so students could complete the inventory without feeling rushed. Phase II (post-test) data were collected two weeks before the end of the spring semester. The SLPI was emailed to students and they were

asked to complete it in seven days. After one follow-up email all but one student completed the SLPI.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were calculated using SPSS 18.0 for Windows. To explore the first research question, paired-samples *t*-tests compared initial mean SLPI scores (Phase I) of all student employees, irrespective of group membership, with post-test SLPI scores (Phase II). To address the second research question, a k-group multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted on five dependent variables: the leadership practices. The independent variable was training group (*full treatment*, *partial treatment*, or *control*). Leadership scores were coded by calculating the mean change from pre to post-test and were generated for each of the five leadership practices.

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Results

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Cronbach's alpha was used to determine instrument reliability. The Chronbach's alpha results (.852) indicated the inventory accurately measured the students' leadership capacity. Additionally, a non-significant Levene's Test indicated the data do not violate the homogeneity of variance assumption. Mean score observations revealed that the full treatment group did score higher than both the partial treatment and control groups on all five leadership practices. The paired-samples *t*-tests yielded a statistically significant result for *inspiring a shared vision*, $t(50) = 2.386$, p = .02, indicating modest improvement between the student employees leadership capacity from Phase I ($M = 20.39$, $SD = 3.86$) to Phase II ($M = 21.76$, $SD = 3.48$). The test revealed no significant mean differences for the other four leadership practices (see Table 4).

[Insert Table 4 here]

To address the second research question, a k-group MANOVA was conducted on the five leadership practices as dependent variables and leadership training group, with three levels, as the independent variable. The sample of 51 student employees was distributed as *mentors* (25.5%)*, mid-level supervisors* (31.3%)*, and new hires* (43.2%)*. The dependent variate, i.e. the linear composite of the dependent variables (Myers Gamst, & Guarino, 2006), was significantly affected by leadership training group, Pillai's trace = .396, $F(10, 90) = 2.22$, $p = .023$, partial $\eta^2 = .198$. Univariate ANOVAs, with a Bonferroni correction, were conducted on each dependent measure separately to determine the locus of the multivariate effect (Meyers et al., 2006). A non-significant Levene's Test confirmed the assumption of homogeneity of variance, thus further analysis was appropriate (Field, 2005).

The analyses revealed that leadership group did significantly affect *encouraging the heart, $F(2, 48) = 7.07$, p = .002, $\eta^2 = .228$. Furthermore, *enabling others to act* approached significance, $F(2, 48) = 2.60$, p = .085, $\eta^2 = .098$. Tukey HSD post hoc tests suggested that the full treatment group ($M = 2.08$, $SD = 3.15$) had significantly higher changes in *enabling others to act* scores than did partial treatment ($M = -.375$, $SD = 2.58$) counterparts. Additionally, the full treatment group had significantly higher *encouraging the heart* scores ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 2.61$) than did the partial treatment ($M = -1.13$, $SD = 4.92$) and control groups ($M = -.818$, $SD = 3.86$). No statistically significant effects were observed for the other leadership practices. Table 5 shows the pre-test/post-test mean change scores on each leadership practice for each leadership training group.

[Insert Table 5 here]

Discussion

Responding to the needs of the profession and pressures from external constituents, this investigation aimed to assess the development which occurred through participation in a year-long leadership training program. The results of this study indicated that Rec Sports professionals can create meaningful leadership development programs by designing curricula using a sound theoretical foundation (Faircloth & Cooper, 2007). Leadership philosophies abound across various job sectors. Within the university setting, however, there has been limited research exploring the effectiveness of leadership development of Rec Sports student-employees (Sicilia & Spacht, 1990; Toperzer et al., 2011). There are, however, researchers who have directly addressed the topic of leadership development amongst college students (Adams & Keim, 2000; Komives, 1994; Posner & Brodsky, 1993, 1994; Posner & Rosenberger, 1997). This study offers guarded support for the previous explorations of college students' leadership development.

Despite the promising findings, there are some limitations. Because the data were collected from one university, generalizability is limited. Additionally, the small sample size limited the statistical power and possibly contributed to the non-significant between group differences on some of the leadership practices. The researchers intended to collect data over two more years in order to improve statistical power, but the mean differences though not all significant, did indicate important learning and growth had occurred for those student employees who received the full treatment. As such, it was determined that instituting the full leadership program for all Rec Sports student employees was more important than finding statistical significance. Another important limitation was not

exploring the potential moderating effects of other variables, including: gender, length of employment, or other areas of campus involvement where leadership development might occur (e.g. club sports, residential life, or social organizations). These limitations, however, provide fertile ground for future study.

The purpose of this research was to investigate the effectiveness of a student leadership training program. If Rec Sports programs are indeed developing student leaders, it was thought that the full treatment group would attain higher post-test scores relative to both the partial treatment and control groups. The results affirmed that believe and to that end, this study adds to the extant literature on student development and leadership training. The role of leadership training programs and development of student employees in Rec Sports, however, remains a fertile area of inquiry. For example, the relationship between leadership development and other educational and employment variables poses intriguing possibility. Questions for possible future research include:

1. The sample for the current study utilized students from a liberal arts and sciences university. Will there be similar results if a large, research-focused university is used?

2. Is there a relationship between length of employment and leadership development?

3. Does involvement in other extra-curricular activity moderate leadership develop among Rec Sports student employees?

Furthermore, subsequent explorations should examine possible predictors of leadership development using hierarchical linear modeling or multiple regression analysis. The concepts presented above provide additional research on leadership development and

suggestions for building on extant literature. In fact, leadership development of Rec

Sports student employees is scarcely explored in the literature. These findings indicate

that further investigation is justified.

Practical Implications

Devaney (1997) indicated: "Creating an organizational climate that promotes

leadership and learning in student employment is important for the success of . . . student

activities as well as for the students' future success" (p. 9). Findings of this study

revealed that leadership development does occur in the Rec Sports setting. However, with

no significant mean differences between the control and partial treatment groups, the

analyses indicate that leaders may not develop with truncated training programs.

Specifically, the findings point to the value of using a sustained rather than a *one-off*

approach to leadership training.

Despite the fact that Rec Sports professionals *know* they have an impact, it is

incumbent upon them to confirm that influence. As the culture of higher education

continues to evolve, the burdens of proof and the need to provide a tangible return on

investment are becoming increasingly important. Assessment and evaluation tools are

useful, formative, and can benefit future program development, but using them

effectively takes effort (Carr & Hardin, 2010; Haines, 2010).

Though this study is the first to use the SLPI in a Rec Sports setting, it has been

used extensively to study other college student leaders. The benefits associated with the

use of the SLPI are therefore numerous. Unlike an instrument developed in-house, the

SLPI is ready to use with little preparation time. Another major advantage of the SLPI is

affordability; its expense, compared to the return on investment in the form of learning,

growth, and development, is relatively low. Another key strength of the instrument is its psychometric soundness. Specifically, the SLPI has high levels of both reliability and validity, confirmed by numerous empirical studies (Adams & Keim, 2000; Komives, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 2008; Posner & Brodsky, 1993, 1994; Posner & Rosenberger, 1997). Moreover, because Kouzes and Posner have developed a student workbook and facilitators' guidebook, using the SLPI as a measurement instrument can provide direction and focus to leadership program.

In summary, it is time that a significant investment be placed on how Rec Sports justifies its existence. The measurement of a Rec Sports professional's impact goes beyond the number of users in a day or total number of teams competing in a league. Participation and usage statistics only begin to describe the affect that Rec Sports programs have on the lives of employees and participants. Suffice it to say, there is a deeper, richer level of impact and that story must be told as effectively as possible. Utilization of the SLPI (or other formal assessment instruments) will equip practitioners with the necessary tools to both improve students' development and highlight that learning as a means to validate Rec Sports as an essential component in the comprehensive student experience.

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