

College or University Student Organizations: Which are More Effective at Developing Leaders?

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Abstract

This study sought to examine student perceptions of the effectiveness of college and university student organizations on their leadership development. All current undergraduate students in the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALS) were invited to participate in the study. Usable responses were obtained from 158 of the 794 undergraduates for a response rate of 19.9%. The majority of participants indicated they believed CALS organizations have contributed to their leadership awareness (n=89, 59.3%) and behaviors (n=78, 52.4%). When asked to rate the effectiveness of CALS organizations at contributing to their leadership abilities and skills, the most frequent response was a 4 (n=44, 29.9%) on a scale from 1 to 5. The majority of participants also indicated that university organizations have contributed to their leadership awareness (n=101, 70.6%) and behaviors (n=96, 67.1%). When asked to rate the effectiveness of university organizations at contributing to their leadership abilities and skills, the most frequent response was a 5 (n=41, 28.9%) on a scale from 1 to 5. Overall, participants indicated university-wide organizations were more effective at contributing to their leadership development.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

For several decades now, there has been a noted lack of leadership skills in American undergraduate students. Love and Yoder (1989) found representatives of the agricultural industry have been criticizing such a lack of leadership skills since as early as 1980. McKinley, Birkenholz, and Stewart (1993) noted that while employers require college degrees for individuals to be employed in leadership positions, the number of college graduates possessing leadership characteristics and abilities continues to dwindle.

In 1981, the Connecticut Mutual Life Insurance Company initiated a survey to investigate the extent to which traditional American values have remained prevalent in contemporary society. As part of the survey, 1700 business, government and professional leaders were asked 'What are the obstacles to leadership in America?' Their responses to 'Our educational system does not provide people with leadership skills' was quite interesting: 48% responded that it was a very important obstacle, 38% responded that it was a somewhat important obstacle, and only 15% responded that it was not important as an obstacle to leadership in America.

Astin and Astin (2000) noted that leadership development should be a critical part of the college experience. Similarly, Love and Yoder (1989) identified leadership development as one of seven educational outcomes for undergraduates in colleges of agriculture.

A survey of leadership literature suggests that leadership can be learned and developed

(Bass, 1990a; Bennis, 1994; Kouzes & Posner, 1997). Like other disciplines, theory suggests, that leadership learning can take place through three primary sources: trial and error (Thorndike, 1913), observation of others (Bandura, 1986), and education. Connors and Swan (2006) identified three areas within higher education in which leadership development can occur: within a course, an academic department, and through experiential leadership.

For many years, leadership development in undergraduates was seen as an indirect result of their education. In other words, leadership skills were developed in the non-curricular and extra-curricular activities in which students participated, perhaps through experiential leadership, including trial and error, or observing others. The theoretical framework for this study is rooted in the Social Learning Theory of Bandura (1986) and the Connectionism Theory of Thorndike (1913). Bandura's theory posits that the behavior of an individual can change after observing another's behavior. Thorndike's theory posits that learning takes place through trial and error. In the context of this study, an individual's participation in collegiate student organizations can enhance the development of their leadership awareness and behaviors through trial and error and observing others.

The leadership development of undergraduates should include intentional leadership education such as formal leadership courses, but the impact of student organizations and activities should not be ignored. Based on the findings of their study, McKinley et al. (1993, p. 83), recommended that "students should be motivated to increase their levels of participation and involvement in activities and organizations" and "Further research should be conducted to identify other activities which influence leadership development of agriculture students". Bass (1990b) stated,

Whatever the education or training effort, its effectiveness in improving leadership depends first on identifying what needs improvement then on demonstrating or helping the training or students discover how to change his or her perceptions, cognitions, attitudes, and behavior (pp. 817-818).

Studies have documented the leadership development needs of undergraduates (Gardner, 2007; Litzenberg & Schneider, 1987; Maricle, 2003; Schumaker & Swan, 1993) and have explored the impact of formal leadership courses and experiential leadership (see Connors and Swan, 2006). Additional research such as Park and Dyer (2005) has been conducted to identify positional leaders within a College of Agriculture and then describe their prior leadership experiences and the impact of FFA and 4-H participation, but little research has been conducted that examines the perceptions of all undergraduates, not just those in leadership positions, related to the impact of various student organizations and activities on their leadership development.

Purposes and Objectives

This study, conducted as part of a larger study, sought to describe perceptions of current College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALS) undergraduates related to college and university student organizations. The specific research objectives of this study were to:

1. Identify which CALS organizations current undergraduates are involved in;
2. Describe the extent to which current CALS undergraduates believe CALS organizations impact their leadership development;
3. Identify which university-wide organizations CALS students are active in; and
4. Determine the extent to which current CALS undergraduates believe university-wide student organizations impact their leadership development.

Methods and Procedures

Population and Sample

The population for this study consisted of all undergraduate students pursuing a bachelor's degree in CALS. A total of 794 undergraduates were identified and included in the population frame for this study. Responses were obtained from 204 of the 794 undergraduates. A total of 46 responses were deemed by the researchers as unusable, yielding usable responses from 158 of the 794 undergraduates for a total response rate of 19.9%.

Instrumentation

A single researcher-developed instrument was used to collect data for this study. The survey instrument consisted of 11 questions including closed-ended, open-ended, multiple-response, and likert-type questions. The instrument was reviewed by a panel of experts for content and face-validity prior to its use.

Data Collection and Analysis

The instrument was administered via a web-based survey. The first page of the survey functioned as an informed consent page and included a description of the study, defined participation in the study as voluntary, and described any potential risks associated with participation. By clicking on the "next" button at the bottom of the page, respondents gave their consent to participate in the study. The second page of the study consisted of the 11 questions included on the instrument. To accomplish objective one, the first question listed all of the CALS approved student organizations and asked students to indicate all organizations they were active in at the time of the survey. To accomplish objectives two and four, students were asked to indicate whether or not they believed the CALS organizations and then the university-wide organizations contributed to their leadership awareness and a separate question if they contributed to their leadership behaviors. Participants were also asked to rate the effectiveness of each type of student organization at contributing to their leadership development on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 = not effective and 5 = extremely effective. To accomplish objective three, an open-ended question was included on the survey asking students to list all university-wide organizations they were active in at the time of the survey including, but not limited to, student government, Greek system, student activities, living groups, etc.

The web-based instruments were administered following the Tailored Design Method by Dillman (2000). Up to five contacts were made for each participant included in the population frame using Survey Monkey. When responses were received, participants were removed from the database for future contacts. In this study, nonresponse error was addressed by comparing early responders to late responders for statistical differences (Ary, Jacobs, & Razavieh, 1996; Lindner, Murphy, & Briers, 2001; Miller & Smith, 1983). Late responders were defined as the

later 50% of the respondents (Lindner et al.). No statistical differences were found when comparing the early responders to the late responders.

Descriptive statistics such as frequencies and percentages were used to accomplish the objectives of this study.

Results/Findings

Objective one sought to identify which organizations current undergraduates are involved in within the CALS. Table 1 shows the frequency of responses to the question about which CALS student organizations participants were active in. Of the 158 participants, almost three quarters ($n=113$, 71.5%) selected at least one CALS student organization. Two student organizations, the Pre-Vet Club and Collegiate FFA had the most frequent responses ($n=18$, 15.9%) followed closely by the CALS Ambassadors ($n=17$, 15.0%). Five CALS student organizations, ASABEB (Biosystems), Collegiate 4-H, International Textile and Apparel Association, Livestock and Meats Teams, and the Soil Stewards, received the lowest frequency of responses ($n=2$, 1.8%) while still showing student participation. There were two student organizations, the Aldrich Entomology Club and the Soil and Site Evaluation Team, listed as CALS student organizations on the survey that received no responses for participation.

Table 1.
Participants' indication of clubs within the College of Agricultural and Life Sciences in which they are active in (n=113)

Provided Organizations	<i>f</i>	%
Collegiate FFA	18	15.9
Pre-Vet Club	18	15.9
Ambassadors	17	15.0
PAAEYC-SA	16	14.2
Student Idaho Cattle Association	16	14.2
Agriculture Student Affairs Council (AgSAC)	15	13.3
Phi Upsilon Omicron	14	12.4
Agribusiness Club	9	8.0
Microbiology, Molecular Biology, and Biochemistry Club	9	8.0
American Associations of Family and Consumer Sciences (AAFCS)	8	7.1
Block and Bridle Club	8	7.1
ASABE (ASM)	6	5.3
Food and Nutrition Club	6	5.3
Dairy Club	5	4.4
Food Science Club	4	3.5
Sigma Alpha Agriculture Sorority	4	3.5
Plant and Soil Science Club	3	2.7
Rodeo Club	3	2.7
ASABeE (Biosystems)	2	1.8
Collegiate 4-H	2	1.8

International Textile and Apparel Association	2	1.8
Livestock and Meats Judging Teams	2	1.8
Soil Stewards	2	1.8
University of Idaho Student Society of Aboriculture	1	0.9
Aldrich Entomology Club	0	0.0
Soil and Site Evaluation Team	0	0.0

Objective two sought to describe the extent to which CALS undergraduates believe CALS organizations impact their leadership development. Table 2 shows whether or not participants believe CALS student organizations have impacted their leadership awareness and behaviors. The majority of participants indicated that CALS organizations have impacted their leadership awareness ($n=89$, 59.3%). Slightly more than half of the participants ($n=78$, 52.4%) believe that CALS organizations have impacted their leadership behaviors. The responses for the question of the organizations contributing to leadership awareness consisted of 150 responses and eight nonrespondents, while the question of the organizations contributing leadership behaviors consisted of 149 responses and nine nonrespondents.

Table 2.
Contribution of CALS organizations toward leadership awareness and behaviors

	Yes		No	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Would you say these organizations have contributed to your leadership awareness? ^a	89	59.3	61	40.7
Would you say these organizations have contributed to your leadership behaviors? ^b	78	52.4	71	47.7

^a $n = 150$. ^b $n = 149$.

Table 3 shows participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of CALS organizations at contributing to their leadership skills and abilities. On a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 = not effective and 5 = extremely effective, the most frequent response was a 4 ($n=44$, 29.9%) followed closely by a response choice of 3 ($n=42$, 28.6%).

Table 3.
Effectiveness of CALS organizations at contributing to the leadership development of CALS undergraduates (n=147)

Organization Type	Value Label	<i>f</i>	%
CALS student organization	1	35	23.8
	2	12	8.2
	3	42	28.6
	4	44	29.9
	5	14	9.5

Note: Value Labels: 1=not effective, 5=extremely effective.

Objective three sought to identify university-wide student organizations in which CALS students are active (i.e. Student Government, Student Activities, Greek, Living Groups, etc.).

Participants were allowed to list as many organizations as they were involved in. Ninety-nine participants responded to the question. A total of 148 organizations were listed. Individual organization responses were grouped according to the type of organization for ease of data analysis and interpretation. Frequency of responses within each group are reported in Table 4. Greek organizations had the highest activity rate ($n=26$, 17.4%) with individual responses including specific sororities, specific fraternities, and general Greek participation. Leadership Organizations including student senate, student orientation, peer advising, and ambassador organizations had the second highest frequency of responses ($n=25$, 16.8%) followed closely by Co-Curricular & Pre-Professional Organizations ($n=24$, 16.1%) including organizations such as Landscape Architect Club, Young Farmers and Ranchers, and Pre-Dental Club. The organizations with the lowest frequency of responses were Private Residence Groups ($n=5$, 3.4%), Women’s Organizations ($n=5$, 3.4%), and Minority Organizations ($n=3$, 2.0%).

Table 4.
Participants’ indications of organization across campus they are active in (n=99)

Organization Reported	<i>f</i>	%
Greek	26	17.4
Leadership Organizations	25	16.8
Co-Curricular & Pre-Professional Organizations	24	16.1
Recreational/Entertainment Organizations	16	10.7
Religious Organizations	14	9.4
Residence Halls	11	7.4
Honor Organizations	10	6.7
Service Organizations	9	6.7
Private Residence Groups	5	3.4
Women’s Organizations	5	3.4
Minority Organizations	3	2.0

Objective four sought to describe the extent to which CALS undergraduates believe university-wide organizations impact their leadership development. Table 5 illustrates students’ perception of the contribution of university-wide student organizations toward their leadership awareness and leadership behaviors. The majority of participants believe that university-wide student organizations have contributed to both their leadership awareness ($n=101$, 70.6%) and their leadership behaviors ($n=96$, 67.1%).

Table 5.

Participants' indication of organizations across campus contribution to their leadership awareness and behaviors (n=143)

	Yes		No	
	<i>f</i>	%	<i>f</i>	%
Would you say these organizations have contributed to your leadership awareness?	101	70.6	42	29.4
Would you say these organizations have contributed to your leadership behaviors?	96	67.1	47	32.9

Table 6 shows participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of university-wide student organizations at contributing to their leadership skills and abilities. On a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 = not effective and 5 = extremely effective, the most frequent response was a 5 ($n=41$, 28.9%). Slight less than one-quarter of participants also selected response choices 3 ($n=33$, 23.2%) and 4 ($n=32$, 22.5%).

Table 6.

Effectiveness of university-wide organizations at contributing to the leadership development of CALS undergraduates (n=142)

Organization Type	Value Label	<i>f</i>	%
University-wide student organizations	1	27	19.0
	2	9	6.3
	3	33	23.2
	4	32	22.5
	5	41	28.9

Note: Value Labels: 1=not effective, 5=extremely effective.

Conclusions and Implications

Due to a response rate of only 19.9%, the findings of this study are much more exploratory than explanative. However, they nonetheless offer interesting results for consideration by the profession. Findings of this study showed that CALS undergraduates are participating in many of the student organizations within the college. Almost three-quarters (71.5%) indicated that they participate in at least one of the student organizations within CALS. This finding suggests that students are taking advantage of at least some of the opportunities made available to them in terms of CALS student organizations.

The majority of participants also believe that CALS student organizations are contributing to their leadership awareness (59.3%) and leadership behaviors (52.4%). While this is encouraging, it is perhaps of more concern to recognize that over 40% of respondents do not believe that CALS organizations are contributing to their leadership awareness (40.7%) or leadership behaviors (47.7%).

When asked to rate the effectiveness of CALS organizations in contributing to the development of leadership skills and abilities on a scale from 1 to 5, the most frequent response

was a 4. It is somewhat concerning that less than 10% of the respondents in this study believe that CALS organizations are extremely effective at contributing to the development of leadership skills and abilities. Many of the organizations within the college exist to offer students opportunities for professional development, participate in community service activities, and enjoy fellowship with other students with similar interests. Perhaps these organizations do not emphasize leadership development as a part of professional development, and therefore, members do not recognize a connection to their own development as a leader.

Participants in this study are also active in university-wide student organizations and activities. Two-thirds (66%) of the participants in this study indicated that they are involved in at least one university-wide student organization. The majority of students believe that university-wide student organizations are contributing to their leadership awareness (70.6%) and leadership behaviors (67.1%). When asked to rate the effectiveness of student-wide organizations in contributing to the development of leadership skills and abilities on a scale from 1 to 5, the most frequent response was a 5. It is encouraging to see that over one-quarter of the respondents (28.9%) view university-wide student organizations as extremely effective at contributing to the development of leadership skills and abilities.

Fewer students reported active participation in university-wide student organizations as compared to CALS student organizations. Yet, overall, participants in this study perceive university-wide student organizations such as student government, Greek, and living communities as more effective than CALS student organizations at developing leadership awareness, behaviors, skills, and abilities. Perhaps this is due to the fact that many of the organizations identified as university-wide student organizations require more commitment to the organization and involve more focused, long-term leadership education. There is evidence to suggest that single, short leadership program efforts are less effective than extended, sustained programs (Cummins, 1995; Tabke, 1999; Yukl, 2002). Many of the university-wide student organizations, especially student government and the Greek system, clearly incorporate leadership development into their yearly program of activities which may be more effective than the single, short leadership development efforts more commonly found in the CALS organizations.

Recommendations

This study showed that CALS undergraduates believe university-wide organizations are more effective at developing leadership awareness, behaviors, skills, and abilities than student organizations within the college. However, the low response rate jeopardizes the generalizability of the findings beyond the respondents. Additional studies, perhaps including multiple institutions, should be conducted to obtain a larger response rate so as to make the findings more generalizable.

In this study, more respondents were involved in CALS organizations than university-wide organizations. Colleges of agriculture should capitalize on this involvement and work to incorporate more leadership development into its organizations. It is recommended that CALS organizations determine the extent to which leadership development is actually a part of their mission, and implement additional strategies to develop the leadership potential of members.

Additional studies should be conducted with the leaders of the student organizations in CALS to assess their perceptions related to what their particular organization does to build the leadership potential of its members.

The population for this study consisted of all current undergraduates, not just those in leadership positions. Perhaps at this stage in their career, undergraduates have strengthened their potential to lead but have not been put in situations requiring them to effectively use their skills and abilities. In other words, perhaps they are developing as leaders through observing others (Bandura, 1986), but have yet to develop implement their own leadership skills and abilities through trial and error (Thorndike, 1913). As a result, participants may not truly recognize the impact of the student organizations they have been a part of. Future studies should compare the perceptions of students who hold leadership positions within the various types of organizations and those who do not hold leadership positions. The influence of classification (freshman, sophomore, junior, senior) should also be investigated.

This study was based on the perceptions of students related to the impact of student organizations on their leadership development. No data related to their actual level of leadership skills and abilities was collected. While identifying and understanding the perceptions of students is important, future studies should be conducted to gather empirical evidence related to the impact of student organizations.

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