

SELF-PERCEIVED LEADERSHIP SKILLS OF STUDENTS IN A LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS IN AGRICULTURE COURSE

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Abstract

Self-perceived leadership skills/behaviors of students enrolled in a college of agriculture "Leadership Programs in Agriculture" course were assessed. A descriptive survey was used to collect data from 58 students enrolled in a "Leadership Programs in Agriculture" course. Findings indicated that students perceived themselves as possessing higher leadership skills. In addition, students also participated in a variety of organizations and activities. Prominent among them were athletics, intramurals, department clubs, FFA, 4-H, and church groups. Significant positive relationships were found between participation in department clubs and leadership skills. Based on the findings, it was recommended that students be provided with opportunities for involvement in community activities and college departmental organizations.

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

In recent years, colleges of agriculture across the United States have initiated different forms of leadership courses in order to meet business and industry's changing needs of the 21st century. A key factor sought by agribusinesses in students is that students have demonstrated leadership within a team environment (Oliver, 1991). In addition, Radhakrishna and Bruening (1994) reported that interpersonal skills were rated highly important for employment by agribusinesses. Numerous year "2000" reports have encouraged the development of leadership courses and related programs throughout the Land Grant System. In light of the need and numerous recommendations, more than half of the agricultural education departments in the U.S. offer undergraduate courses focusing on leadership development (Brown & Fritz, 1994). A study developed for use in one of these courses examined students' self-perceived satisfaction ratings of intended outcomes related to leadership development. Students responded favorably (3.79/5.0) to successfully achieving a set of leadership-related constructs where leadership courses exist (Gamon, Chun-Shih, & Breja, 1998). However, few studies have focused on the worth of collegiate student organizations in developing tomorrow's agriculture and natural resources professionals (Birkenholz & Schumacher, 1994).

In the past, faculty looked toward various means of developing student's interpersonal and social skills. Several researchers have noted relationships between active participation in college activities and interpersonal development (Birkenholz & Schumacher, 1994; Eklund-Leen & Young, 1996). Additionally, a study by Love and Yoder (1989) found that students indicated the development of interpersonal and leadership skills as a direct result of curricular or extracurricular activities. However, a significant number of those students were not satisfied with instruction in regards to developing leadership skills. Classroom instruction lends itself to concepts of leadership theory and practice; however, the true-life experiential laboratory through participation student organizations should be included (Fritz & Brown, 1998). Additionally, several researchers have found that exposure to varieties of out-of-classroom opportunities will provide concrete experiences and background knowledge on students as they attempt to integrate leadership theories and skills (Kouzes & Posner, 1990; Wren, 1994; Bolt, 1996).

Past studies indicated many benefits of involvement in student organizations. Eklund-Leen and Young (1996) found that students who were highly involved in campus life tended to view community involvement more positively and anticipated engaging in community activities outside the school. According to Kouzes & Posner, (1988) leadership is an observable and learnable set of practices. Individuals who possess the desire and persistence to lead, may enhance their skills and abilities required for the leadership role. Birkenholz & Schumacher, 1994, studied leadership skills of college of agriculture graduates at the University of Missouri and found positive relationships between student participation in student activities and perceived leadership skills.

Purpose and Objectives

The overall purpose of the study was to determine the self-perceived leadership skills/behaviors of students enrolled in a College Leadership course. This descriptive research included the following objectives:

1. Describe demographic characteristics of students enrolled in College of Agriculture Leadership course.
2. Determine self-perceived leadership skills held by students enrolled in College of Agriculture Leadership course.
3. Identify student levels of participation in University-level leadership activities.
4. Determine relationships, if any, between leadership skills and student levels of participation in college and departmental clubs.

Methods and Procedures

The population for this descriptive research was all 58 students enrolled in a College of Agriculture Leadership course during the Fall 1998 semester at Iowa State University.

The survey instrument used by Birkenholz and Schumacher (1994) was modified and used for the study. The instrument contained three sections. Section one contained 44 leadership behavior/skill items measured on a six-point Likert-type scale which ranged from 1=strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree. Section two contained information relative to student levels of participation in university leadership activities. The final section contained demographic information such as age, gender, marital status, place of residence, class standing, GPA, career aspiration and living outside home (dormitory, sorority, fraternity etc.,).

Content and face validity were established by a panel of experts consisting of faculty and graduate students at Iowa State University. The instrument was administered to all 58 students in a regular class hour. Data thus collected were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, Personal Computer Version (SPSS/PC+). Descriptive statistics such as frequencies, percentages, means and standard deviation were used to summarize the data. Point-biserial correlation was used to describe the relationships between leadership skills and level of participation in university activities. The alpha level was set a priori at .05 level. All correlation coefficients were interpreted using Davis (1971) scale. Only relationships that were found significant were reported in this paper.

A post-hoc reliability analysis was conducted to assess instrument reliability. The 44 leadership skill statements were grouped into five subscales based on Birkenholz and Schumacher (1994) study. The five subscales were: 1) administration, achievement, empathy, communication, and problem solving. Table 1 shows the reliability coefficients for the five subscales for this study and as Birkenhloz and Schumacher's (1994) study.

Table 1.
Reliability Coefficients for the Five Leadership Subscales

Subscale	Number of Items	Cronbach's alpha (N=58)	Birkenholz/Schumacher study (n=293)
Administration	14	.87	.90
Achievement	9	.93	.86
Empathy	7	.81	.67
Community	7	.73	.81
Problem Solving	6	.65	.68
Overall	43	.83	.93

Findings and/or Conclusions

Objective 1: Demographic Characteristics

Demographic characteristics of respondents are shown in Table 2. Approximately 59 percent of the respondents were in the age group of 21-22 years, followed by 34 percent in the age group of 19-20 years. Seventy-six percent of the respondents were male and 24% female. A majority (86.2%) were single, followed by married (12.1%), and divorced (1.7%). Approximately 76 percent of the respondents were raised on a farm, followed by rural area (9%), small town (5%), medium sized town (3%), and city (5%). Juniors comprised 63.8 percent of the respondents, followed by seniors (32.8%), and sophomore (3.4%).

Objective 2: Self-Perceived Leadership Skills

The respondents were asked to rate their self-perceived level of skill in five areas of leadership, (administration, achievement, community, empathy, and problem solving) using a six-point Likert-type scale (1=Strongly disagree to 6 =Strongly agree). Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations for each of the 44 items grouped by five leadership skill areas. Overall the mean scores ranged from a low score of 2.60 for the item, "I find it difficult to consider another person's point of view" to a high score of 5.47 for the item "I enjoy success and strive for it." The respondents rated 13 (29%) of the items 5.00 or higher while 27 (62%) of the items received mean ratings of 4.00 or higher. Only four (9%) of the items received a mean score less than 4.00.

The leadership skill area, "administration" contained 14 items with mean scores that ranged from 4.41 to 5.24 (Table 3). The item "I have a good sense of humor" was rated the highest (5.24). The "achievement" skill area contained nine items with mean scores that ranged from 4.72 to 5.47. The item "I enjoy success and strive for it" received the highest rating (5.47).

Table 2
Demographic Characteristics of Students Enrolled in College of Agriculture Leadership Courses

Characteristic	f	%
Age		
19-20 years	20	34.5
21-22 years	34	58.6
Over 23 years	4	6.9
Gender		
Female	14	24.1
Male	44	75.9
Marital Status		
Single	50	86.2
Married	7	12.1
Divorced	1	1.7
Widowed	-	-
Place of Residence		
On a farm	44	75.9
Rural area	5	8.6
Small town	3	5.2
Medium-sized town	2	3.4
City	3	5.2
Others	1	1.7
Class Standing		
Freshmen	-	-
Sophomore	2	3.4
Junior	37	63.8
Senior	19	32.8

The “empathy” skill area contained six items with mean scores that ranged from 2.60 to 5.40. The item “I like to maintain good interpersonal relations with co-workers was rated highest (5.40) by the respondents, while the item, “I find it difficult to consider another person’s point of view” was rated lowest (2.60) by the respondents. The “community” skill area contained seven items with mean scores that ranged from 3.66 to 5.07. The item “I enjoy meeting new people” was rated highest (5.07), while the item “I am the type of person who is involved in community activities” was rated lowest (3.66). The final leadership skill area “problem solving” contained six items with mean scores that ranged from 4.79 to 5.38. The item “I like to see conflicts resolved” was rated highest by respondents. Overall, the respondents perceived themselves as possessing higher leadership skills.

Objective 3: Level of Participation

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of participation and/or activities in various organizations during their high school and college years. Data relative to their level of participation are shown in Table 4. As shown in Table 4, a majority (over 62%) of respondents participated in college athletics either as a member, officer or a committee person. Similarly, 26% of the respondents reported that they were members of FFA, and 24% members of a honor society. Fifteen percent of the respondents served as officers of FFA. Level of participation and activities were minimal in student council and class officer (21% each), followed by FHA (1.7%).

At the college level, the most frequently participated activity was intramurals with 52 percent of the respondents. Similarly, 40 percent of respondents participated in departmental clubs. Eleven or 19 percent of respondents had participated in more than one departmental club activities. Respondent participation was very minimal in professional/honor societies (8.6%), followed by sorority/fraternity (5.2%), student government and ROTC (1.7% each).

In the category “Other,” approximately 45% of respondents were active members in church groups, followed by 4-H club (20.7%) and boy/girl scouts (13.8%). It is interesting to note that 24% of 4-H club members participated in more than one activity (Table 4).

Table 3.

Means and Standard Deviation for Self-perceived Leadership Skills Grouped by Five Subscales

Statement	f	Mean*	SD
Administration (14)			
I can motivate people	58	4.84	0.72
I am able to inspire people	58	4.41	0.77
Other people accept me as a leader	58	4.55	0.84
People look to me for advice	58	4.66	0.91
People seek guidance from me when they have difficult times	58	4.59	0.80
I am an effective decision maker	58	4.60	0.72
I have a good sense of humor	58	5.24	0.76
People confide in me because they consider me to be trustworthy	58	5.19	0.63
I am willing to take charge of and lead a group	58	4.84	0.93
I can persuade others to respect my point of view	58	4.69	0.80
Other people accept my ideas	58	4.72	0.67
Making friends and getting along with others is easy for me	58	4.93	0.99
I am able to convince others of my ideas	58	4.60	0.72
People often allow me to lead group discussion	58	4.31	1.08
Achievement (9)			
I persevere on a project until it is complete	58	5.00	0.94
I consider myself to be a flexible person	58	4.72	0.93
I enjoy success and strive for it	58	5.47	0.79
Once I begin a project, I feel I must see it through to completion	58	5.19	1.00
I view myself as a professional	58	4.79	1.10
I strive to achieve my professional goals	58	5.28	0.74
I consider myself to be an achiever in life	58	5.10	1.57
I am enthused about my work	58	5.28	0.79
I feel I am proficient in my work	58	5.40	0.77
Empathy (7)			
I willingly listen to others	58	5.22	0.68
I find it difficult to consider another person's point of view	58	2.60	1.23
I am concerned about maintaining good interpersonal relationships	58	4.86	1.05
I use tact in everyday life	58	4.60	0.94
I am a cordial person	58	4.74	0.89
I feel people admire and respect me for the person I am	58	4.86	0.83
I like to maintain good interpersonal relations with workers	58	5.40	0.70
Community (7)			
I am the type of person who is involved with community activities	58	3.66	1.33
I enjoy sharing information with others	58	4.84	0.89
I encourage others to become involved in activities	58	4.57	0.98
Belonging to organizations is important to me	58	4.07	1.37
It is easy for me to develop an interest in people	58	4.93	0.86
I enjoy meeting new people	58	5.07	0.93
Problem Solving (6)			
I understand that other people have feelings, motives, & goals of their own	58	5.40	0.75
I consider myself to be intelligent	58	4.88	0.68
I like to see conflicts resolved	58	5.38	0.70
When someone comes to me with a problem, I try to put myself in their shoes so I can better understand the situation	58	4.79	0.81
I feel confident openly promoting issues that I enjoy expressing my ideas on a given issue	58	4.98	0.91

mean computed on a scale that ranged from 1 "strongly disagree" 6 "strongly agree"

Table 4.
Level of Participation in Activities and Organizations

Activities	Non Participant		Member		Committee Person		Officer		More than one	
	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%	f	%
High School										
Athletics	10	17.2	36	62.1	3	5.2	3	5.2	6	10.3
Honor Society	36	62.1	24	24.1	3	5.2	2	3.4	3	5.2
Student										
Council	37	63.8	12	20.7	1	1.7	4	6.9	4	6.9
Class Officer	43	74.1	12	20.7	3	5.2	-	-	-	-
FFA	22	37.9	15	25.9	3	5.2	9	15.5	9	15.5
FHA	57	98.3	1	1.7	-	-	-	-	-	-
College										
Departmental										
Clubs	18	31.0	23	39.7	2	3.4	4	6.9	11	19.0
Sorority/										
Fraternity	43	74.1	3	5.2	4	6.9	3	5.2	5	8.6
Student										
Government	57	98.3	1	1.7	-	-	-	-	-	-
Professional/										
Honor	49	84.5	5	8.6	1	1.7	3	5.2	-	-
Intramurals	22	37.9	30	51.7	3	5.2	1	1.7	2	3.4
ROTC	55	94.8	1	1.7	1	1.7	1	1.7	-	-
Other										
Church Group	22	37.9	26	44.8	-	-	6	10.3	4	6.9
4-H Club	19	32.8	12	20.7	-	-	13	22.4	14	24.1
Boy/Girl										
Scouts	49	84.5	8	13.8	-	-	1	1.7	-	-
Military	57	98.3	1	1.7	-	-	-	-	-	-

Objective 4: Relationships Between Leadership Skills and Level of Participation

Point-biserial correlations were computed to determine relationships, if any, between leadership skills and participation in college-departmental club activities. Descriptors suggested by Davis (1971) was used to describe the relationships between the two variables. Results are shown in Table 5. Findings revealed low to moderate, positive relationships, significant at the .05 level between 15 leadership skill items and participation in college departmental clubs. The correlations ranged from a low of .27 to a high of .57. For all the sixteen leadership skill items, respondents who participated in college departmental clubs perceived having higher leadership skills than those who did not participate in departmental club activities. Of the 58 respondents, 40 were members of departmental clubs and 18 were non-members.

Conclusions & Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following conclusions and recommendations were made:

Overall, students perceived that they possess leadership skills at a higher level. The leadership skill, achievement, was rated highest by the students, followed by problem-solving, empathy, administration, and community. Findings also indicate that students perceived themselves as not adequately involved in community activities.

Students participated in a variety of organizations and activities. Prominent among them were athletics at the high school level, followed by FFA, and Honor Society. At the college level, however, students participated in intramurals and department clubs. In addition, students also participated in church groups, and 4-H Clubs.

Significant positive relationships were found between leadership skills and participation in departmental clubs. Students who participated in leadership programs significantly rated their leadership skills higher than those students who did not participate in leadership programs. This finding mirrors those results of Birkenholz and Schumacher's (1994) study.

The following recommendations are offered for future research:

Students should be encouraged to be more involved in community activities. Faculty developing courses in leadership programs should include community-based activities in their courses. Also, students might be given bonus points for participation in college departmental clubs.

Participation of students in organizations, especially at the college and departmental levels should be encouraged . Incentives for student participation should be provided. Faculty might consider using service-learning components in conjunction with local 4-H, FFA or other youth organizations.

Table 5
Relationships Between Level of Participation in University Activities and Self-perceived Leadership Skills

Statement	Non-Participation			Participation			Point-biserial
	N	M	SD	N	M	SD	
Other people accept me as a leader	40	4.78	0.70	18	4.06	0.75	.34*
People look to me for advice	40	4.83	0.83	18	4.28	0.96	.27*
I persevere on a project until it is complete	40	5.10	0.93	18	4	0	.3
I am involved in community activities	40	4.05	1.11	18	2.78	1.40	.40**
Concerned about maintaining good interpersonal relationships	40	5.13	0.97	18	4.28	1.02	.28*
Encourage others to become involved in activities	40	4.80	0.65	18	4.06	1.35	.40**
I use tact in everyday life	40	4.75	0.95	18	4.25	0.83	.44*
I am a cordial person	40	4.88	0.88	18	4.44	0.86	.31*
I am able to convince others of my ideas	40	4.75	0.59	18	4.28	0.89	.33*
People often allow me to lead group discussion	40	4.53	0.96	18	3.83	1.20	.39**
Belonging to organizations is important to me	40	4.45	1.20	18	3.22	1.40	.57**
It is easy for me to develop an interest in people	40	5.10	0.81	18	4.56	0.86	.40**
I enjoy meeting new people	40	5.20	0.85	18	4.78	1.06	.28*
I view myself as a professional	40	4.97	1.00	18	4.39	1.24	.37*
Maintain good interpersonal relations with co-workers	40	5.50	0.60	18	5.17	0.86	.27*

* p < .05 level; ** p < .001 level.

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