

**Determining Leadership Needs as Perceived by Undergraduate Leadership Students**

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## **Determining Leadership Needs as Perceived by Undergraduate Leadership Students**

### **Introduction/need for research**

Agricultural Education at the collegiate level has evolved over time to include the development of future teachers, leaders, communicators, scientists and business professionals. To fulfill these duties, educators in this discipline must be aware of the perceived needs and abilities in the area of leadership. Given the perceived leadership needs and strengths, instructors can begin attempting to link curricular experiences to specific leadership skill acquisition. The development of this research project was guided by the following questions: 1.) What are the perceived leadership needs of students when entering a leadership development program? 2.) In what areas do curricular changes and experiences need added/changed to meet these perceived needs?

### **Theoretical Framework**

For the purposes of this study, the theory of student involvement (Astin, 1999) was utilized. This theory describes the relationship between input, environment, and output. This theory posits that students already have specific traits and attributes before they enter into an academic program. These traits and attributes are considered to be the inputs. Based on these inputs, curricular experiences can be tailored to make positive outcomes. In the case of this study, the inputs of these students are their perceived leadership educational needs. Once those can be identified, specific leadership experiences (curricula) can be tailored to the needs of students in an effort to have more personal, student-centered outcomes.

### **Methodology**

The population utilized in this research was four cohorts ( $N=71$ ) of students enrolled in a year-long leadership development program at a large mid-western university. The university's department of Agricultural Education facilitates the annual leadership program. Students seeking admission into the program engage in a competitive application and interview process and had to be enrolled in a major within the College of Agriculture, Food, and Natural Resources. The program consists of a seminar style, one-hour formal class times each week and a variety of leadership projects throughout the year. All data for this study were collected from the students as they entered the leadership academy program to assist in determining needs.

To assess the gap between leadership importance and competence (leadership needs) of the students in the program, a leadership needs assessment was utilized (Velez, McKim, & Simonsen, 2013). The survey instrument measures perceived importance and perceived competence which are scaled from 1 "not at all important/competent" to 6 "extremely important/competent." The questionnaire consisted of 13 constructs which are: understanding leadership, awareness of self, practices ethical behavior, sustains leadership, values diversity, enhances communications skills, manages conflict, develops teams, leads change, manages projects, understands community, and committed to serving.

To calculate the perceived need for leadership skill development, mean weighted discrepancy scores (MWDS) were calculated for each of the 13 constructs. Based upon the Borich Model (1980), MWDS's were calculated by finding the difference between perceived competence and perceived importance of each item in a given construct. This value was later multiplied by the mean calculation for 'importance,' then divided by the given number of observations (Borich, 1980). Instrument reliability for the 13 constructs range from  $\alpha = .89$  to  $\alpha = .96$ .

### Results/Findings

After data analysis, all of the 13 constructs were perceived as *Very Important* or *Extremely Important*. Additionally, the greatest need for leadership programming was within the construct of *Managing Conflict* (MWDS=6.28). A complete table of results (Table 1) can be seen below.

Table 1.

Construct/Leadership Area	Perceived Importance <sup>1</sup>	Perceived Competence <sup>2</sup>	MWDS <sup>3</sup>
Managing Conflict	5.39	4.17	6.28
Understanding Community	5.24	4.21	5.61
Commitment to Serving	5.04	4.40	5.29
Awareness of Self	5.30	4.39	4.79
Practicing Citizenship	5.31	4.46	4.53
Managing Projects	5.29	4.46	4.41
Developing Teams	5.36	4.54	4.40
Sustaining Leadership	5.33	4.61	4.39
Valuing Diversity	5.41	4.61	4.36
Leading Change	5.05	4.22	4.17
Enhancing Communication	5.16	4.39	4.00
Ethical Behavior	5.66	5.08	3.30
Understanding Leadership	5.05	4.44	3.09

<sup>1</sup>Items scaled from 1, “not at all important” to 6, “extremely important”

<sup>2</sup>Items scaled from 1, “not at all competent” to 6, “extremely competent”

<sup>3</sup>Mean Weighted Discrepancy Scores; a higher score indicates greater student perceived need

### Conclusions

After calculating MWDS scores for all of the constructs, the researchers were able to ascertain the perceived needs of the leadership students. Along with *Managing Conflict*, *Understanding Community* (MWDS=5.61) and *Commitment to Serve* (MWDS= 5.29) yielded the greatest perceived educational need by the students. Leadership constructs that generated the lowest perceived need were *Understanding Leadership* (MWDS=3.09) and *Ethical Behavior* (MWDS=3.30). Given the perceived leadership needs and strengths, instructors can begin attempting to link curricular experiences to specific leadership skill acquisition.

### Implications/Recommendations/Impact on Profession

Granted, the conclusions are based on the described population so caution needs to be taken with generalization. However, the researchers recommend the area of conflict management is an area that necessitates curricular focus. In this case, the researchers plan on making curricular changes to the leadership program by incorporating case studies and other supplemental activities in the area of managing conflict. An additional recommendation is that other leadership educators incorporate the use of the Borich model to evaluate the perceived needs of their leadership students. In identifying these needs (inputs) and making appropriate curricular changes and additions (environments), outcomes of leadership education will potentially be more authentic and impactful for students.

**References**

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