

**Impactful Themes from a Year-Long Leadership Academy**

Laura Hasselquist  
Ben Weikert  
Dr. Jon Simonsen  
University of Missouri

125A Gentry Hall  
University of Missouri  
Columbia, MO 65211  
(573) 884-7375  
simonsenj@missouri.edu

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## **Introduction**

The public's increased concerns about the quality of leadership for the future has challenged college and university campuses to provide formal opportunities to develop students' leadership abilities (Gardener, 1995; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2000). Toward this cause, the Litton Leadership Scholars (LLS) program is a year-long leadership academy for undergraduate students at the University of Missouri. The LLS program was developed in 2012 in conjunction with the Jerry Litton Family Memorial Foundation. Jerry Litton was a politician and agribusiness man with deep ties to agriculture, FFA, and the University of Missouri. Mr. Litton, his wife, and two young children were tragically killed in a plane crash in 1976. To continue the legacy of the Litton family and aid in developing leaders for agriculture the Litton Family Memorial Foundation created an endowment at the University of Missouri to fund several areas, including the LLS program. Many leadership programs are deemed to be impactful (Rosch & Caza, 2012); however, researchers have noted the need for scientific evaluation of leadership education programs to stay rigorous and academically relevant (Braun et al., 2009). Therefore, this case study sought to explore the nature and impact of the LLS program.

## **Framework**

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement was utilized as a framework for the study. Astin postulated the amount of student learning and development is directly proportional to the involvement in an academic environment. The LLS program incorporates coursework focused on 13 leadership constructs along with academic and field based mentorships.

## **Purpose, Objectives, and Methods**

This case study centered around graduates of the LLS program with a central question focusing on what made the leadership academy experience impactful. A purposive convenience sample was utilized to achieve maximum variation. The participants of the study represented three completed cohorts and had a wide variety of majors within the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources. Potential participants were contacted via email and seven agreed to be interviewed. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Triangulation, peer debrief, and member checking were utilized to ensure trustworthiness of the data (Stake, 1995).

## **Findings**

**Theme 1: Personal Connection to Jerry Litton** - All of the participants interviewed stated they felt connected to Jerry Litton and his story which helped to enhance the experience. Litton embodied all 13 leadership constructs discussed in the academy. Being able to personally connect helped to increase their ability to understand leadership in context. Peter said, "I think of him as a role model." Matt said, "Jerry Litton was such a big voice for the agricultural community, I've definitely been inspired." Alex reflected on how Litton showed leadership in a variety of settings, "you have to take on leadership roles, especially even if it's not the glamorous, there's not tons of benefits for you. If you care about an organization or a cause, you would have to go for that role."

**Theme 2: Connections Within the Cohort** - The participants stated they felt a strong sense of community with each other. The sense of community allowed students to more easily express

and share personal experiences and opinions comfortably, which again enhanced the learning environment. Anna stated how the connections worked outside of the classroom and fostered quality discussions, “We carpoled to all the events. We talked about things. We worked on homework together. We talked about leadership stuff. We were very open in class.” Kate identified the positive classroom atmosphere created by the sense of community, “The synergy would be a good description of it too. When everyone was in the classroom being able to feed off of each other when we were discussing things.”

**Theme 3: Networking** - The structure of the academy allowed for a multitude of networking opportunities. Networking included interactions of students, faculty, mentors, and business individuals. Alex said, “when we had speakers come in or whenever we were able to interact at an event with [foundation], to me, that was really beneficial.” Bea noted one of the beneficial parts of the program “was just making those personal connections.” The Litton name can also help students network within the business world as Bea found out. “It can be difficult to get in [job shadow program] but when you say ‘the Litton Program’ doors open that normally won’t.”

**Theme 4: Reason for Applying** - All the participants noted one of two specific reasons for applying to the leadership academy. They were personally aware of who Jerry Litton was and wanted to be involved in the program, or they were specifically recruited by someone who had connections to the program. Bill noted, “I knew what [Litton] stood for and thought it would be a good idea for me to apply.” While several others stated they were actively recruited by friends as Kate pointed out, “I became friends with some people who had been in it before or were currently in it, and they talked about it, and really encouraged me to apply. I looked into it a little more and thought why not?”

**Theme 5: Length of the Program** - The academy is a year-long program. The length of the program was identified as a strength. It allowed participants time to reflect on personal growth and apply some of the leadership skills and techniques they have discussed. Bill stated, “you can kind of see how you progress over the course of a year better than you do over a semester. . . and being able to apply what you learn throughout the year really helps.”

### **Discussion**

Two unique aspects of the academy (the length and focus on a single individual) were identified as beneficial. Personal connections to Litton allowed for students to contextualize leadership in real world settings and become inspired to serve as leaders in their communities or organizations. The close community feel of the cohort aided the learning environment, and has led to continued relationships outside the classroom. LLS allowed for networking with industry professionals which the participants noted as a benefit. They also identified the personal connections with the foundation board as valuable on a personal level. Applying to the program was done for a specific reason; having an outside voice promoting the program is a valuable recruiting tool. The year length of the program allowed participants to immediately apply leadership skills and strategies to a variety of settings and reflect on growth. While the findings are specific to the LLS, there are several recommendations for practice that can be applied to other types of leadership academies. Recommendations for practice include providing a relatable context for the leadership education, developing a feeling of community, capitalizing upon networking, and providing time for reflection on personal growth and application of leadership skills.

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