

**Employers' Perceptions of Student Participation in High Impact Experiences:
Generational Differences**

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Discussions related to workplace readiness and competencies needed for college graduates to meet industry needs is common; however, literature documenting workplace readiness and competency needs related to agricultural leadership graduates is limited and what is available is dated (Graham, 2001). Further, no research could be identified that looked at how generational differences impact employers' perceptions within the context of agricultural leadership graduates. In many work places, the generational gaps stretch from baby boomers to generation X to millennials (Schullery, 2013). Lyons, Urick, Kuron, and Schweitzer (2015) explain that there is a need for understanding generations from a qualitative perspective as this can help us better understand the ways that generation shapes our thoughts and identities.

Recent literature has focused on how to improve classroom teaching to better prepare students for the workplace (Rateau, Kaufman, & Cletzer, 2015), the importance of team-based projects for students (Lamm, Carter, & Melendez, 2014), and student perceptions of an agricultural leadership degree (Moore, Odom, & Moore, 2013). Curricula to shape and mold graduates should be continuously reviewed and revised in order to remain up-to-date and relevant (Kunkel, Maw, & Skaggs, 1996). "As the agricultural industry changes over time, the educational systems pertaining to agriculture and related subjects must not fall behind" (Graham, 2001, p. 22).

Purpose

This purpose of this study was to document the generational differences among employers of agricultural leadership students in regard to perceptions of student participation in high impact experiences. Research objectives were:

- 1) Determine the high impact learning activities valued by entry-level employers of agricultural leadership graduates,
- 2) Determine how high impact learning activities are valued by employers of agricultural leadership graduates, and
- 3) Determine how high impact experiences are valued by generationally different employers of agricultural leadership graduates.

Methodology

Currently, over 50 companies recruit and hire agricultural leadership graduates from Texas A&M University (Moses, personal communication, April 15, 2016). Utilizing non-probability, convenience sampling, the researcher identified five employers of agricultural leadership graduates who could share meaningful information regarding the topic of workplace readiness and competencies. Each employer possessed unique experience and competence (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The selected employers each had participated in the Texas A&M University Agriculture & Life Sciences (AGLS) Career Fair consecutively for the last three years and had hired at least five students each year who had majored in agricultural leadership. Specifically, three men and two women were selected for participation. One participant was a Millennial, two participants were members of Generation X, and two participants were classified as Baby Boomers. Each participant took part in a semi-structured interview via telephone (Kvale, 1996) which focused on knowledge and skills needed as well as their perceptions of the importance of high impact experiences related to entry-level undergraduate hires. The researcher employed constant comparative analysis to analyze the data. Data was organized into categories and

themes. Trustworthiness was established through member checks, multiple peer debriefings, and triangulation.

Results and Conclusions

Multiple prominent themes resulted from the data that indicated each generational group carried differing opinions regarding high impact experiences. When asked how employers valued high impact practices such as internships, research mentorships, and study abroad experiences, distinct differences emerged based on generational groupings.

The Millennial respondent preferred students to participate in study abroad experiences over internships and research. Respondent three stated, “study abroad shows me they have studied another culture and been exposed to the idea of adapting.” This respondent also commented on the importance of being flexible in the workplace and noted that study abroad experiences can encourage flexibility. Additionally, this respondent ranked internships over research experiences. Generation X respondents collectively valued internships the highest followed by study abroad experiences and research, respectively. Respondent four stated, “Getting experience in the field related to my company is key.” This respondent explained that the only way to get this experience is through a hands-on internship. An additional Generation X respondent explained that internships build upon the students’ self-motivation, initiative, and drive. Baby Boomers were the most passionate and opinionated group, particularly opposing study abroad trips. Respondent one stated in a concerned tone, “Sometimes study abroad is a vacation.” Both Baby Boomer respondents commented on a study abroad trip’s return on investment related to the student’s performance in the workforce. According to both respondents, students who have participated in multiple study abroad trips often expect to travel extensively, request more vacation time, and have unrealistic expectations.

Based on findings, it was concluded that an employer’s generational grouping has the potential to impact their perceptions of high impact experiences and how those high impact experiences can benefit or detract from job performance. These findings are consistent with research studies related to generational differences in the workplace (Lyons et al., 2015).

Implications and Recommendations

Clear understanding of employer expectations is necessary in order to properly prepare students for the workforce, and recognition that expectations can vary depending on an employer’s generation can be helpful to students. High impact experiences are believed to provide an advantage to students; however, as found in this study, interpretation of those experiences may vary depending on the employer’s generational category. For those employers who did not value study abroad or research experiences, students need to highlight and emphasize the learned skills and traits in a way that the employer can connect those experiences to future job performance. A post study abroad program to guide students in marketing their experiences to employers would be beneficial. Further, encouragement for students to participate in multiple high impact learning experiences that connect with their interests should be accompanied with instruction as to how to relate those experiences to future employment opportunities.

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