Motivation to Lead and Intent to Lead of Undergraduate Agriculture Leadership Majors

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Introduction

Leadership education has quickly become a topic of importance for students in post-secondary schools. Employers have expressed interest in these soft skills, viewing them as one of today's most important skill sets (Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton, & Fielitz, 2011). Leadership skills are in high demand from college graduates, leading to universities to increase resources to develop formal academic leadership programs (Astin & Astin, 2000; Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003); many of which are housed in Colleges of Agriculture in the United States (Velez, McKim, Moore, & Stephens, 2015). But simply successfully completing a leadership course does not guarantee leaders in practice (Cho, Harrist, Steele, & Murn, 2015). Identifying students' motivation and intent to lead can allow us to assess whether students are not only gaining the knowledge and skills for leadership, but if they actually have the motivation and intent to be leaders. This study fits Priority Three of the National American Association for Agriculture Education (AAAE) Research Agenda, specifically addressing the need for a professional workforce that addresses the challenges of the 21st century (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

When describing motivation, the categories of Entrepreneurship, Professionalism, and Leadership (EPL) can be measured individually and can help illustrate motivations, efficacies, and intentions (Chan et al., 2012). In more recent studies it has been shown that a student's motivation to lead can affect how they lead in various situations and their outcomes (Chen, 2016). Motivation to lead has been directly linked to a student's leadership participation in their roles and training (Chan, Rounds, & Drasgow, 2000). Although gender, race, and behavior have played a role in a student's motivation to lead (Rosch, Collier, & Thompson, 2015), the correlation between motivation to lead, intent to lead, and leadership self-efficacy is a relationship that could have a real impact on a student's outcome and perspective.

Purpose and Methodology

The purpose of this descriptive, slice-in-time study was to describe the motivation and intent to lead of undergraduate students enrolled in an academic leadership course in a college of agriculture during the fall 2016 semester. The approach utilized was survey research, as the intent of the study was to describe characteristics of a large group of people (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Huyn, 2012). Five core courses and one elective course, representing various stages of the agricultural leadership degree program with a total enrollment of 411 students, were selected to participate in this study. After removing students who were concurrently enrolled in multiple leadership courses, the accessible population for this study was 343 students (N=343). The final sample size of 142 students (n=142), yielded a response rate of 41%. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

The instrument used was an electronic version of the EPL Career Aspiration Survey (Chan et al., 2012), with twelve additional demographic questions. The EPL Career Aspiration Survey is a 57-item instrument used to examine motivation, intent, and self-efficacy along three scales: leadership, professionalism, and entrepreneurship. Construct validity has been established for the

instrument using Cronbach's alpha with internal reliability of 0.72 and 0.74 for motivation to lead and intent to lead, respectively (Chan et al., 2012). For ease in data interpretation, only the motivation and intent to lead scales were included in this study. The motivation to lead scale consisted of 9 items, and the intent to lead section consisted of 3 items, all of which were measured on a five-point summated scale: *1(Strongly Disagree), 2(Disagree), 3(Neither Disagree nor Agree), 4(Agree), and 5(Strongly Agree).* Scores were summated for each construct and categorized by the norms (seven categories ranging from Very Low to Very High) developed by Chan et al. (2012). Institutional Review Board approval was received to conduct the study.

Results

Descriptive statistics were used to explore undergraduate leadership students' motivation and intent to lead. Descriptive statistics disclose attitudes concerning distinctive factors of groups who may be dissimilar (Agresti & Finlay, 2009). Data analysis included the use of frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviations. Categories used for analysis were: gender and time spent in major (# of courses completed). Overall, the majority of students in the study had a slightly high to very high level of motivation and intent to lead, 67.61% and 65.49%, respectively. The average question scores for motivation to lead ranged from 2.59 (SD=1.07) to 4.19 (SD=0.76). Of the nine questions for the motivation to lead scale, four items had mean scores above 4.0 and one item with a mean score below 3.0. The average question scores for the three items on the intent to lead scale ranged from 3.83 (SD=0.99) to 4.23 (SD=0.75).

Of the respondents, 62 identitified as male and 79 identified as female. While there were no statistically significant differences among gender, in the subject of both motivation and intent to lead, males tested slightly higher than females. For motivation to lead, 69.35% of males score slightly high to very high, and 67.09% of females scored slightly high to very high. For intent to lead, 66.13% of males score slightly high to very high, and 64.56% of females scores slightly high to very high.

For ease of analysis, progress through the major was split between completion of 1-2 leadership courses (n=77) and 3+ leadership courses (n=65), as many students come to a leadership major later in their collegiate careers. While the majority of students in the study, regardless of number of leadership courses completed, scored in the slightly high to very high range, motivation to lead dropped slightly as students completed more courses, from 68.83% to 66.15%. Likewise, intent to lead also dropped as students completed more courses, from 71.43% to 58.46%.

Conclusions and Implications

Since the population was students who have self-selected to participate in an academic leadership program, it is not surprising that a majority of students indicated a high motivation and a high intent to lead. Importantly, a majority of students scored slightly high to very high for every construct scale. However, a reduction occurred with the intent to lead scale for students further along in their agricultural leadership degree program. This could be because of the students' increased maturity and familiarity with a variety of leadership concepts, thus making them more cognizant of the costs associated with leadership. Consequently, leadership educators should consider their students' motivation and intent to lead as they frame and develop their courses and academic programs.

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