

Teaching Leaderships Skills through Experience: Preparing for a State Leadership Conference

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Introduction/ Need for Innovation

The Idaho FFA State Leadership Conference (SLC) is a four-day event that includes 12 Leadership and Career Development Events, student workshops, six conference sessions, industry tours, service projects, and various stakeholder events. Over the last 10 years, attendance at SLC increased by approximately 600 students to 1,500 students. This created the need for additional support staff. In response, we created a semester-long college course to instruct student interns in coordinating SLC. Currently, 24 students are selected, hired for a specific role, trained, and given responsibility of components at SLC.

Student interns take full ownership in coordinating and executing their portion of the conference, collaborate with team members, interface with stakeholders, and manage conflict. Students organize their portion of the conference throughout the semester and execute SLC at the culmination of their experience. This experience equips students with communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills crucial in the 21st century workforce (Crawford, Lang, Fink, Dalton & Fielitz, 2011). Experiences such as this allow students to apply leadership principles in a real-life context which are beneficial to students understanding of how to apply skills (Crawford et al., 2011).

How it Works

All students at the University of Idaho with a GPA of 2.75 or higher are eligible to apply for the SLC course. Students apply in November to be admitted into a spring course. Applications are reviewed by a selection committee and students progress to an individual and group scenario interview process. The selection committee determines the students admitted into the course and their assigned specific duties and roles. Each intern is invited to accept their assigned position based on a job description of that role.

The course begins in January and the interns meet once a week until SLC in early April. We cover topics regarding professional dress guidelines and written communication etiquette during class meetings. During class meetings, interns also work to coordinate their portion of the conference. We provide each intern with access to a shared drive that includes documentation from previous individuals in each position. The interns complete an expectations and goals assignment in January and meet with the course instructor for a midterm check-in in March. The course instructor provides feedback and input to prepare interns to successfully plan SLC.

As SLC get closer, students use additional time outside the course to prepare documents, confirm registration numbers, and finalize conference details. During the week of SLC, the interns work individually and/or collectively to execute their internship roles. Responsibilities and assignments include tasks such as: planning CDEs and LDEs; organizing workshops and conference sessions; planning service projects; coordinating industry tours; conducting PR and media outreach; and other roles essential to SLC. Following SLC, the course ends with a post-conference exit interview and course evaluation.

Results

Student interns reflected on the benefits of their experience in a course evaluation. Notable reported benefits included serving FFA members, experiencing the effort it takes to organize a large event, developing communication and leadership skills throughout the semester

and at SLC, and recreating the positive experiences for current FFA members. Undergraduate agricultural education students reported benefits including network with agriculture teachers from across Idaho, gain insight into how SLC is ran, and learn about how Idaho FFA works.

We took intern feedback regarding their experience into consideration and made two fundamental changes in 2019 related to the internship structure and curriculum. We redirected the intern roles to better meet conference goals. We divided roles into three teams and selected a student director for each team. This format provides more structure for role assignments, improves overall duty functions, and streamlines communication between the interns and instructors. Additionally, it provides further leadership and growth opportunities for the student directors and more support from one another in their individual roles.

The course instruction is now team-based education and new curriculum topics include process of leadership, building trust and navigating conflict, event planning, professional communication, commitment and accountability, crisis and conflict management, and attention to results. Course content is supplemented with readings from *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* (Lencioni, 2002). Five class meetings are devoted to completing internship tasks in preparation for SLC. Meetings are interspersed with the above curriculum designed to prepare students to work effectively with team members, and gain the technical skills needs to be successful at SLC.

This course and internship structure also provides benefits to multiple stakeholders including the Idaho FFA Association, the Idaho Agricultural Teachers association, the Idaho FFA Foundation, and the Idaho Alumni and Supporters. The interns provide quality support at a low cost for the FFA Association. Giving back to the FFA and helping students be successful can help the student interns stay connected to FFA after their internship (Sanok, Stripling, Stephens & Griffith, 2015).

Future Plans/Advice to others

The central goal of this course is to provide learning opportunities to a new class of interns each year, while still delivering high quality assistance and management of SLC. Maintaining a complete record of all tasks, deadlines, and important information pertaining to each role is crucial to the continued success of future intern classes. Coordinating SLC requires students and the course instructor to collaborate with several, diverse stakeholders. This requires the establishment of consistent and open communication procedures between all parties. The course curriculum is intended to help teams work together effectively and learn strategies to help them successfully coordinate SLC.

The sustainability of this course is a central concern. Allocating resources for course instruction and intern management is a challenge for Agricultural and Extension Education (AEE) faculty and the Idaho FFA Association. While an undergraduate or graduate student has previously overseen the course, hiring three team directors may be a more sustainable way to operate this project. Additional funds are needed to support director positions.

Costs/ Resources Needed

The Idaho FFA Association provides hotel rooms and food for the students during the week of SLC. This cost fluctuates year to year but is approximately \$5,200. One faculty member within the AEE serves in an advising role for the course. This requires 3-5% FTE. The work of an undergraduate or graduate teaching assistant is needed to manage and direct this course November-April.

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