

Building Community and Developing Leadership through a Virtual Scavenger Hunt

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Introduction

Nation-wide lockdowns as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic required university faculty to make significant pedagogical shifts for the 2020-2021 academic year. This, compounded with the mounting evidence showing negative impacts on college student mental health and wellbeing due to the pandemic and remote instruction (Wang et al., 2020; Zhai & Du, 2020), challenged us as leadership educators to rethink how our leadership curriculum and programs were offered in a virtual format.

The Leadership Academy is a yearlong leadership program offered to on-campus undergraduate students in the colleges of Agricultural Sciences and Forestry at Oregon State University. The 2020-2021 cohort, consisting of 56 students, moved to a virtual format. As program administrators, we made significant adjustments to our instruction to build a connected community while equipping students with leadership skills. To do this, we launched a virtual team-based scavenger hunt using GooseChase, a smartphone application. We placed students into teams of five and challenged them to participate in weekly missions or tasks. The missions invited students to reflect on their leadership learning from the weekly seminar, share insights from the leadership book they were reading, and engage in non-academic tasks (e.g., take a selfie with a live lobster, donate to a charity, take a video doing jazzercise). Each mission had different point values, and students were encouraged to submit missions on behalf of their team to win the game. Over the ten-week term, the eleven teams submitted 489 individual submissions for the 94 unique missions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how students in the Leadership Academy perceive participation in a team-based virtual scavenger hunt as contributing to their development in specific leadership outcomes. The questions that guided our investigation were, 1) *what areas of leadership development do students perceive as being developed through participation in a team-based virtual scavenger hunt?* and, 2) *how do students describe the value of a team-based virtual scavenger hunt?* This study contributes to the growing body of research that investigates specific leadership competencies concerning curricular experiences (McKim & Velez, 2017; Seemiller, 2013)

Methods

At the end of the spring 2021 term, we asked the cohort to complete a reflection by placing check marks at the intersection of a curricular leadership experience from the term (i.e., team-based virtual scavenger hunt) and one or more of 13 leadership competencies. The 13 leadership competencies were drawn from Velez et al.'s (2013) instrument and included *understanding leadership, awareness of self, ethical behavior, sustaining leadership, valuing diversity, enhancing communication, managing conflict, developing teams, leading change, managing projects, practicing citizenship, understanding community, and commitment to serving others*. Students were also asked two open-ended questions regarding the activity, 1) *what was valuable about this experience?* and, 2) *what would you change about this experience?* Students were emailed this reflection and asked to email completed reflections to the administration team

by the end of finals week. To analyze the data, we summed the counts for how often students checked off each competency and used Saldaña's (2009) guidelines for coding to analyze the written responses from the open-ended questions. We used collaborative coding to enhance the credibility of the emergent themes and offer illustrative quotes below to enhance trustworthiness (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Findings

Forty-seven students responded to the reflection questionnaire, 46 of whom checked at least one of the 13 leadership competencies developed due to participation in the GooseChase game. The three most frequently reported competencies were *developing teams* (n = 34), *understanding community* (n = 32), and *valuing diversity* (n = 27). Five themes emerged from the open-ended responses, including *fun*, *team building*, *connection*, *support*, and *reflection*. Overall, students described the experiences as one that provided an opportunity to build connections with their peers in a "low-key" way, engage in fun yet authentic missions, and escape the isolation from pandemic "slump". Below are a few excerpts to capture the themes:

"THIS WAS SO FUN. It was really exciting to see what my LEAD-mates had under their creative and hilarious sleeves. I felt more connected to them in this weird world we live in right now."

"I liked that we were able to connect on a personal level here. We were able to get to know each other and also share random things about us."

"This activity shows the importance of getting involved in a group and the community."

Conclusions and Recommendations

Results from this study found a strong core of leadership competencies, *developing teams*, *understanding community*, and *valuing diversity* as three areas students perceived to be most developed through participation in a virtual team-based scavenger hunt. We also found students had positive experiences through their engagement. They saw it as a fun outlet during the pandemic, an opportunity to reflect on their learning, and a way to connect with peers they had never met in person. This is promising evidence considering our program emphasizes relationship building and leadership development through meaningful experiences. We recommend future studies collect more comprehensive and descriptive data to better capture how experiences like this build specific leadership skills. In this study, the responses from the open-ended data did not always align with the quantitative data. For example, no student mentioned diversity in the open-ended responses, but it was the third-highest competency checked on the questionnaire. Additional data collection methods such as in-depth qualitative interviews would allow for a more nuanced explanation of the connections between the experience and the self-perceived leadership outcomes. As practitioners, we recommend leadership educators consider activities like GooseChase to build a connected culture while providing an outlet to reflect on their leadership development and learning.

References

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