Learning by Leading™ at University of Georgia (L*L@UGA): Developing Students' Leadership Skills through a Comprehensive Experiential Learning Program

Cora Keber
2450 South Milledge Avenue
Athens, GA 30605
706-542-6158
ckeber@uga.edu

James C. Anderson II, Ph.D.
131 Four Towers
Athens, GA 30602
706-542-0515
jcanderson@uga.edu

Learning by Leading™ at University of Georgia (L*L@UGA): Developing Students' Leadership Skills through a Comprehensive Experiential Learning Program

Introduction

Botanical gardens were originally designed as physic gardens or medicinal gardens in close proximity to medical facilities as a way to have easy access to plant materials (Botanical Gardens Conservation International, 2021). Over time, the purpose of public gardens has transitioned into an educational space connecting learners of all backgrounds to natural history, conservation, health/well-being, stewardship, environmental education and awareness, especially in university garden settings (Botanical Gardens Conservation International, 2021). Due to this change, we need experienced and trained individuals to serve in leadership positions to ensure the goals set forth can successfully be accomplished whether it be in the university garden setting or within the green industry. The American Association for Agricultural Education Research Agenda highlights this need within Research Priority 3, Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce That Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century, and Research Priority 4, Meaningful, Engage Learning in All Environments (Roberts et al., 2016). Research has also indicated that agricultural and natural resources leaders want workers that are dependable, critical thinkers, strategic planners, great verbal and written communicators, and have the ability to solve problems (Easterly et al., 2017). This innovative idea will focus on how university botanical gardens can develop leader competencies and skills in students through experiential learning opportunities that lie within a robust educational pipeline to create lifelong learners.

How it Works

In 2007, the University of California (UC)-Davis Arboretum and Public Garden started developing a program called Learning by Leading ™. The administration believed that students learned best by leading. This program was designed to have university students working under the direction of a staff mentor. When students participated and wanted increased levels of leadership and responsibilities they would step into the student leader/co-coordinator position and begin leading a team of students, gaining leadership skills and working with the support of a staff mentor. In 2017, UC Davis invited two universities to join in a pilot study.

Since joining the pilot, Learning by Leading at University of Georgia (L*L@UGA) has developed their own conceptual framework for designing and evaluating student leadership development through experiential learning. The model integrates Kratz Leadership Approach (Northouse, 2020) withKolb's Experiential Learning Model (Kolb, 1984) to demonstrate how a university student can step into a leadership role with increased technical skill, motivation and drive to lead a team.

The skills approach takes a leader-centered approach focusing on the knowledge and abilities of a leader as opposed to the personality traits of a leader (Northouse, 2020). It postulates that people can be trained and learn to be effective leaders as opposed to the idea that certain individuals are born to be leaders (Northouse, 2020). The conceptual model is a spiral moving through each of the four components of experiential learning which are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. At each level or component, students are learning a specific set of leadership skills characterized as technical

skills, interpersonal skills, and conceptual skills. As students develop diverse experiences andskills they will increase their self-efficacy towards their new skill set.

Using the model, students start in teams working on a project with a staff mentor and student co-coordinators. These student co-coordinators were participants from the previous year that moved up the spiral. Project teams can work on environmental conservation, youth education, or horticulture. Students who choose to continue up the spiral will move from a co-coordinator to an intern who works on a special project that they design to address a need in the Garden or community related to the aforementioned concentration areas. Students have reached the top of the leadership spiral when they apply for externships or full-time jobs in one of the concentration areas. Each experience lasts one semester starting with an orientation and ending with a project showcase.

Results to Date

The program has collected demographic information, applications, student profiles and team videos since 2017 for the nearly 150 students that have participated. These documents show students' perceptions of their leadership development as it relates to technical, interpersonal, and conceptual skills. These results, along with the specific activities created for student leadership development as informed by the model, are highlighted.

Future Plans

A descriptive qualitative research study will take place in fall 2021 looking at three pieces of information from the spring 2021 Learning by Leading ™ applications, student profiles and end of semester team videos. By having multiple methods for data collection, the researcher will be able triangulate the data to ensure that the outcomes are trustworthy and consistent (Heale & Forbes, 2013). The items will be de-identified and coded through a single coder using inductive coding. The research will be looking for key terms and quotes from profiles, application and videos to describe the students gained skills through their interpersonal and intrapersonal communication and experiences. The purpose of this research study is to define what leadership skills and competencies university students are gaining through a comprehensive experiential learning program called Learning by Leading™.

Costs

Line Item	Cost	Quantity	Total	Variables
Leadership Training	1000	1	1000	Existing resources
T-shirts	7	100	700	Number of students
Marketing Materials	500	2	1000	Brochures, flyers, etc.
Project Support	750	9	6750	Number of teams
End of Year Celebration	1500	1	1500	Number involved
Staff Time—development	Varies			
Staff Time—mentors	Varies			
TOTAL			**$10,950**	

References

Botanic Gardens Conservation International (2021, April 18). *About Botanic Gardens.* https://www.bgci.org/abotu/about-botanic-garden/

Easterly, R. G., Warner, A. J., Myers, B. E., Lamm, A. J., Telg, R. W. (2017). Skills students need in the real world: Competencies desired by agricultural and natural resources industry leaders. *Journal of Agricultural Education, 58*(4), 225-239.

Heale, R. & Forbes, D. (2013). Understanding triangulation in research. *Evidenced Based Nursing, 16(4), 98.* https://ebn.bmj.com/content/16/4/98.full

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development.* Prentice-Hall.

Northouse, P. (2019). *Leadership* (8th ed.). SAGE.

Roberts, T. G., Harder, A., & Brashears, M. T. (2016). *American Association for Agricultural Education national research agenda: 2016-2020.* Gainesville, FL: Department of Agricultural Education and Communication.