

Leadership Attitudes and Beliefs at a Hispanic Serving Institution

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Introduction/Theoretical Framework

The Hispanic population in the United States is uniquely poised to play a more significant leadership role domestically and internationally, especially in agriculture. Diversity, notably ethnic diversity, is also believed to contribute to perceived leadership effectiveness in the workplace and the undergraduate environment (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000). Traditional ideas about leadership posit leaders are the most important members of a group and are responsible for the overall health and success of a group. This school of thought is closely linked with hierarchical models of leadership. Alternatives to the traditional hierarchical models of leadership have become more popular and include transformational leadership, followership, authentic leadership, servant leadership, and charismatic leadership (Yukl, 2002; Lowhorn, 2011). Little to no research has been conducted on differences in leadership beliefs of agriculture majors within a Hispanic Serving Institution.

The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991) was used as the theoretical framework for this study. This theory suggests a person's behavior is influenced by their attitudes, the subjective norms, and their perceived behavioral control. Perceived behavioral control is how easy or difficult the individual perceives the performance of the behavior. Actual behavioral control describes the individual's actual skills, abilities, and other prerequisites needed to perform the behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2002).

The objectives of this study were to:

1. Evaluate college agriculture majors at an HSI on their leadership beliefs and measure perceived differences in students' leadership beliefs between hierarchical and systemic thinking.
2. Measure any perceived differences and relationships between leadership beliefs and students' demographic characteristics.

Methods

The population for this study were college agricultural science majors. After IRB approval, participation was solicited from 94 students with 86 useable responses in four agricultural leadership courses, resulting in a response rate of 91%. The participants were primarily junior (33.3%) or senior (52.9%) classification and identified as Hispanic (74.5%) or Caucasian (23.5%). The sample included students from a variety of majors including animal science with pre-vet focus (35.3%), animal science-production (27.5%), agriculture science (21.6%), and agricultural education (15.7%).

The instrument that guided this research was a paper version of the Leadership Attitudes and Beliefs Scale (LABS-III) (Wielkiewicz, 2002) along with demographic questions related to participants. The LABS-III is a 28-item instrument which examines leadership attitudes among two constructs: Hierarchical Thinking and Systemic Thinking. Each scale consisted of 14 items and were measured on a five-point summated scale: *1(Strongly Disagree) to 5(Strongly Agree)*. The hierarchical scale measures beliefs about leadership as being more positional, where leaders are responsible for successes and failures within an organization. The systemic scale measures beliefs about leadership being everyone's responsibility and an organization's chances for success is greater when there is open communication and adaptability (Wielkiewicz, 2000;

2002). Reliability was established with a Chronbach's Alpha of .867; along with individual construct reliability scores of .858 for the Hierarchical scale and .808 for the Systemic scale.

Findings

The first objective was to determine student leadership attitude scores between the hierarchical and systemic leadership scales. Students indicated strong agreement with items on the systemic scale items ($GM = 4.27$, $SD = 0.35$), and moderate to strong agreement with the hierarchical thinking scale ($GM = 3.76$, $SD = 0.61$), items (see Table 1).

Table 1

Mean Scores for Hierarchical and Systemic Thinking Scales

Thinking scale	<i>GM</i>	<i>SD</i>
Systemic	4.27	0.35
Hierarchical	3.76	0.61

Note. 1 = *Strongly Disagree* – 5 = *Strongly Agree*

The second objective sought to determine differences in leadership beliefs, by students' demographic characteristics. This study also sought to determine the relationship between leadership attitudes and demographic characteristics. More specifically, the researchers examined the relationship between demographic characteristics and the mean scores by using the Davis (1971) descriptors (*Negligible* = .00 to .09, *Low* = .10 to .29, *Moderate* = .30 to .49, *Substantial* = .50 to .69, *Very Strong* = .70 or higher). The Hierarchical grand mean had a low association with ethnicity ($r_{pb} = .241$) and organizational membership ($r_{pb} = -.258$), which were both statistically significant.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The highest scores were found within the construct of the Systemic beliefs scale (leadership is everyone's responsibility). Participants felt the initiative of the followers was of the highest significance. In regard to relationships between the leadership scales and demographic characteristics, organizational membership had significant relationships to both hierarchical and systemic thinking scales, which indicated as the student membership decreased, so did the students' leadership scores. Based on these findings, students should be encouraged to participate in student organizations at the post-secondary level.

Leadership programs, especially those training systems for underrepresented students, should emphasize the valuable role systemic leadership plays in facilitating the long-term adaptability of an organization. The students who participated in this study indicated high agreement with systematic scale items. Wielkiewicz (2000) reported individuals with high levels of systemic thinking skills are more likely to be adaptive and successful.

The results of this study support the need for a critical self-assessment of leadership programs to identify methods and strategies effective in facilitating the leadership development of college students. Attention should be paid to the impact of leadership development programs on students within subpopulations. The results of the current study indicate ethnic differences may exist. More research is needed to examine the ethnic difference between specific ethnic groups and between males and females within specific ethnic groups.

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