

The Leadership Yield: Reaping Personal and Professional Growth Through 26 Hours

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Introduction/Need for Research

Undergraduate leadership development is a growing field across academic disciplines (Martinez et al., 2020), allowing students to develop skills, including visioning, strategizing, influencing, and communicating (Bower et al., 2021; Fuster Linares et al., 2020; Rounpel et al., 2019). We defined student leadership as students working together to create positive changes in their academic environments, with support from institutions and staff. (Lyons, 2018). United States (US) agricultural colleges have engaged in leadership development activities with their students (Cletzer et al., 2022; Weeks & Weeks, 2020) and the higher education environment presents an ideal opportunity for leadership development among students (Cletzer et al., 2022), fostering a sense of responsibility with a low risk of failure.

Latinos in Agriculture (LIA), a club at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo has hosted the 26 Hours of Science and Technology (26 Hours) conference since 1988, a conference solely planned and implemented by students. The event focuses on exposing first-generation high school students to college of agriculture majors throughout a 26-hour immersive learning experience (McEwen, 2024). In looking at the Hispanic/Latinx community, when superimposed with academic structures, Azpeitia & Bacio (2022) found that ideas of *familismo* (of obligation to family) and *ganans* (honoring family struggle) were critical in motivating students to complete college. Anecdotally, the long-standing, 37-year-old event lends itself to a high-impact experience for the students it serves; yet, there is no research about 26 Hours or its leadership team. The purpose of this study was to explore students' perceptions of how their roles influenced the delivery of the event, guided by the following research question: How do students perceive their leadership roles while planning and executing the 26 Hour event using Kolb's (1984) experiential model?

Theoretical Perspective

26 Hours is a student-led experiential learning activity; thus, the study was situated within Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model. Experiential learning focuses on the relationship between learning, working, and the overall construction of knowledge based on experience, where the focus is on the process of learning rather than learning alone (Kolb, 1984). The process is cyclical, involving concrete experience (CE), reflective observation (RO), abstract conceptualization (AC), and active experimentation (AE) in perpetuity (Kolb, 1984).

Methodology

A qualitative research approach was used to address the research question, which required in-depth, detailed insights into human activities (Ary et al., 2010; Katz, 2015; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). The population of interest was those students who led the execution of 26 Hours in 2024, and six students opted to participate. We deemed data saturation was met as emerging themes were consistent among participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Participants were provided with scheduling details for 90-minute focus groups on Zoom where responses were recorded and transcripts generated. Respondents were given pseudonyms to maintain anonymity. The focus group protocol was designed using questions aligned with concepts of Kolb's (1984) experiential. The data was analyzed using deductive coding (Saldaña, 2021) to explore themes emerging within the experiential learning components defined by Kolb (1984). We remained open to the emergence of additional themes, and trustworthiness was upheld via the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2025).

Findings

Findings were deductively organized into the four categories of Kolb's experiential learning model. The four main themes associated with the respective categories of the Kolb's model are as follows: Varied Experiences; Student Fulfillment; Personal Growth; and Increased Involvement. Regarding CE, there was a range of experiences, where some students, like Arturo, claimed this was their "first experience" hosting a conference, and others, such as Samantha, noted that their previous FFA experience helped prepare them for similar events. Further, participants reflected (RO) on their experience as being "the best day of the year," like Daniel. Whereas some were more specific, identifying key pieces as memorable. Pedro said, "I would say the most beneficial aspect...was being able to educate these students." Overwhelmingly, participants referred to service to the community, alluding to the cultural tenets within the Hispanic/Latinx community of familismo and ganas. Addressing AC, students acknowledged how they might approach the event differently in the future. Veronica planned on being more involved in the event production in the future, and Daniel was focused on how they could have engaged more efficiently, saying, "in hindsight...I have to find a better balance for myself." In considering applying new knowledge as a piece of AE, students indicated plans they had for the future. Veronica was focused on how to expand the event saying, "I know there's so many different communities that could be reached." Overall, the respondents revered working with their team and found value in giving back to their communities (e.g., cultural, geographic, or ethnic) and noted it was a highlight of their college experience. Samantha said "...it's one of my favorite memories in college that I'm gonna treasure."

Conclusions

Through the lens of Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model, participants expressed their experiences that aligned with the tenets of the Kolb's model. Students had various levels of experience while executing the conference and felt fulfilled in the process of providing a service to their community. Students expressed ideas of being excited about the increased personal growth, which covered interpersonal skills while participating on a team. Finally, students expressed their desire to continue participating in the conference on the production end, citing the deep ties to family and community. In conclusion, the researchers in the study wish to highlight that this form of experiential learning is extremely valuable for students, especially when there is personal/cultural connections to the activity.

Implications/Recommendations

This study explored student leaders' experiential learning during the 26 Hours event through the lens of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984). Students expressed the desire to gather new leadership skills and reinforce those previously learned while being engaged with and helping their community. Future research should focus on investigating ideas associated with familismo and ganas (Azpeitia & Bacio, 2022), and repeating this study with more participants, over time, to monitor for longitudinal trends and gather a greater range of experiences. Concerning practitioner recommendations, advisors and student leaders overseeing these types of programs should consider acknowledging student participants' backgrounds. Additionally, highlighting the importance of building and maintaining relationships may help students tap into the concepts of familismo and ganas during event implementation, thus wanting to honor their obligations to each other and overcome obstacles together as teammates.

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