



2011

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WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Stankus, Lynnae, "Assessing Student Leader Competencies" (2011). *Academic Leadership Academy*. 2.
https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/acad_leadership/2

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Assessing Student Leader Competencies

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Academic Leadership Academy: 2010-2011



Background and Context

Astin's theory of student involvement discusses how the more students are involved with the academic and social aspects of the collegiate experience, the more they learn. The quality and quantity of the student's involvement will influence the amount of student learning and development (Astin, 1984, p. 297). In addition, student persistence in college is related to a student's involvement (Astin, 1975).

Through observations and interactions with students, administrators know that students are gaining various competencies as a result of student leadership positions on campus. However, often we find it difficult to measure and assess their competencies. We also find that students struggle to articulate these skills when asked about their student leadership and involvement experiences. This study aimed to focus on student leadership competencies in Western Michigan University (WMU) student leaders and to qualify their experiences.

Method, Participants and Response Rate

This project consisted of creating an online survey for student leaders on campus. The survey was open for a period of one month and 72 students participated in the survey. Students were invited via email and Facebook to take the survey. Offices such as Student Activities & Leadership Programs (SALP), Residence Life, and the First Year Experience Office were crucial in getting the word to student leaders.

Participants needed to be of junior or senior status, as the survey aimed to show development of competencies in more seasoned leaders. Participants also:

- Were predominately female (67%)
- Did not transfer to WMU (89%)
- Have lived on campus at some point during their college career (89%)
- Have a paid job (74%) with the majority working 10-15 hrs/week.
- Are involved with a registered student organization (92%)

With regards to the number of years they have been involved on campus, the most frequently cited answer was 3-4 years. The most frequently cited GPA was 3.3 - 3.6 (cumulative). In addition, approximately 76% of participants identified as Caucasian (Non-Hispanic), 12% selected African American, 4% Asian or Pacific Islander and 7% selected "other" or declined to comment.



Profile of a Student Leader

For the purpose of this survey, a "student leader" was defined as someone involved in a student organization, having a leadership position on campus (Resident Assistant, Orientation Student Leader, student organization executive board member, etc.) or involved with campus programs or leadership opportunities.

Competencies Assessed

Participants answered questions regarding the following competencies. Competencies were selected based on the National Association for Campus Activities (NACA) student leader competency guide:

- Leadership growth
- Developing meaningful interpersonal relationships
- Collaboration
- Clarification of career choice
- Communication skills
- Multiculturalism
- Intellectual growth
- Clarification of personal values

"Through my work in student activities, I have honed the ability think critically on a subject and be able to formulate and vocalize a unique perspective on a diverse array of topics."

-Jim Stano, senior



Results

97% of participants (or more) cited that their involvement has helped/enhanced their skill development in the following areas (participants selected "strongly agree" or "agree"):

- Being able to hold self and members of my organization accountable
- Being able to develop an inclusive organization that plans for the future and is inclusive of others
- Establishing trustworthy and rewarding relationships with students, faculty and staff
- Listening to and reflecting upon others' points of view
- Treating others with respect



"Involvement at WMU has allowed me to grow as a leader, but more importantly, grow as a person. Everyone always says that you change your major multiple times throughout college, but my journey through leadership has more-so changed my mind about the future."

-Allison Pavlicek, senior

Results

Between 90-96% of participants cited that their involvement has helped/enhanced their skill development in the following areas (participants selected "strongly agree" or "agree"):

- Encouraging WMU pride and community building among the student body
- Working with others, seeking their involvement and feedback
- Using delegation as a means to involve group members
- Conveying messages and influencing others through writing, verbal or non-verbal expression
- Using effective listening skills
- Recognizing the contributions diversity brings to our campus/society
- Advocating for equality and inclusiveness
- Positively impacting others' perspectives on diversity
- Apply previously learned information to a new setting
- Ability to make connections between campus involvement and academic studies
- Understand how culture influences my own values
- Ability to act and make decisions congruent with personal values and the mission of WMU

Between 85-89% of participants cited that their involvement has helped/enhanced their skill development in the following areas (participants selected "strongly agree" or "agree"):

- Promoting and conducting joint programs between organizations
- Construct a strong resume with adequate skills, accomplishments and knowledge
- Take steps to initiate a job search
- Articulate career choice based on assessment of knowledge, skills or interests
- Developing and facilitating presentations
- Work in teams and in multicultural settings
- Seek involvement from people different from myself
- Ability to scrutinize personal values and beliefs

Limitations

The survey respondents were primarily female (67%) so that may have had an impact on the results. However, it is still believed that the survey sample is representative of our campus with regards to cross-cultural and gender breakdown.

In addition, it is impossible to know if all student leaders were invited to take the survey. As student leadership is a broad term, students were targeted based on their on-campus involvement. Therefore, it is difficult to know the exact number of students invited.

With regards to the results of the competencies gained as a result of on-campus involvement, students self-reported this info. Without a rubric completed by someone who witnessed a student's personal development, it is impossible to know how each student defined his/her competencies.

Future Research and Implications

- Create rubrics for students involved in registered student organizations, such as the Campus Activities Board and Western Student Association
- Allow students to self-evaluate competency areas and then provide advisor evaluation
- Showcase student testimonials in literature and promotional materials for SALP
- Target programs and workshops for competencies that had a lower percentage outcome (clarifying career choices, collaboration, etc.)
- As male student leadership is not as prevalent as female student leadership at WMU, we should target programs to address this area
- Continue to target students living in the residence halls with regards to getting involved at WMU, as 89% of respondents lived on campus during their college career



"My involvement with student organizations has increased my confidence when communicating with others, including confronting conflicts, talking to large groups, and accepting criticism."

-Kimberly Boboltz, senior

References and Resources

Astin, A.W. (1984). *Student Involvement: A developmental theory for higher education*. Journal of College Student Personnel, 25, 297-308.

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National Association for Campus Activities
www.naca.org

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