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Exploring Leadership Skill Development of Freshmen in  
a Leadership Living Learning Community

Presentation Track: Practice

Description:

Striving to make a difference in the leadership development of freshmen transitioning into a university is certainly rugged terrain. This presentation highlights the role of learning communities for transitioning freshmen and lessons learned after the first year of a Leadership Living Learning Community in a large university.

Presenter Biographies:

Nicole Stedman, Assistant Professor, is a faculty member of the Agricultural Education Department. She came to Texas A&M in July, 2004 to teach Agricultural Leadership courses at the Undergraduate and Graduate levels. Dr. Stedman's Bachelors of Science, in Human Resource Development, Masters of Science, in Leadership, and Doctorate, in Leadership Education, are from the University of Florida in Gainesville.

Felix Arnold is from Pearsall, TX. He graduated from Texas A&M University in May of 2005 and entered graduated school as a Master's student. He expects to graduate from graduate school from Texas A&M University in May of 2007. He is writing a thesis on the effects of peer

mentoring on the leadership, living, learning community that is located on the campus of Texas A&M University.

Craig Rotter completed his Ph.D in Agricultural Education at Texas A&M University in 2004, with an emphasis in collegiate leadership development. He has served as the Coordinator of Leadership Development within the Department of Residence Life at Texas A&M University since 2001. He has presented professionally at regional and national conferences. Dr. Rotter's passions include cultural change and personal effectiveness. He is currently focused on the development of learning communities and the implementation of academic/student affairs integration models.

# Exploring Leadership Skill Development of Freshmen in a Leadership Living Learning Community

## Introduction

Today, there is an increasing need to establish expectations for college students early in their undergraduate experience. Stakeholders, including employers and parents, have emphasized this (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews, & Gabelnick, 2004). The learning community is an approach bridging disciplines and increasing interaction between diverse students, increasing student retention, and offering an enhanced academic relationship between students and faculty.

At Texas A&M University, the Freshmen Leadership Living Learning Community (L3C) is a new freshmen-year initiative designed to produce reflective, intentional, self-aware learners who are academically engaged, who have made a successful transition from high school to college and who are fully integrated within the university community. In order to create a quality academic learning community for freshmen students, partnerships were developed between the Department of Residence Life and the Department of Agricultural Education. The Department of Agricultural Education is home to the Agricultural Development which emphasis is leadership education.

The Leadership Living Learning Community emphasizes a common connection between students, leadership. One of the primary purposes of the L3C is to make an impact on students' personal leadership development. Instructors for the course used a mix of methods to accomplish this: a) specific curriculum designed to develop leadership, b) co-curricular activities, and c) a personal leadership development workbook.

## Learning Communities

Over the past twenty years, the concept of learning communities has grown, developed, and shown to be an interdisciplinary approach to undergraduate education (Smith et al., 2004).

The most consistent driving factor in the development of academic learning communities in institutions of higher education has been the desire to bring together faculty, staff, administration and students to create an enhanced learning environment intended to prepare students for work and life.

In 2001, the National Survey of Student Engagement reported positive correlations between learning communities and five benchmarks: diversity experiences, gains in personal and social development, practical competence, general education, and overall satisfaction with respect to the undergraduate college experience.

Because of these strong correlations, Texas A&M University has sought to establish learning communities designed to address the freshmen college student initiative. The overarching intent of freshmen learning communities in larger institutions is to simulate the feeling of a smaller college.

In 1998 (¶7), the American Association for Higher Education, the American College Personnel Association, and the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators developed a joint task force identifying the importance of powerful relationships and a shared responsibility for learning. The group identified first that, “learning is fundamentally about making and maintaining connections: biologically through neural networks; mentally among concepts, ideas, and meanings; and experientially through interaction between the mind and the environment, self and other, generality and context, deliberation and, action.” Within the elaboration of this concept the task force members recognize the role that living/learning opportunities play in supporting freshmen college students.

Tinto (1998) provided there exists four different styles of learning communities in higher education. These were linked courses, freshmen interest groups, cluster or federated courses,

and coordinated studies. With that, a learning community can also be residential or non-residential, academically-oriented, or simply by interest. Shapiro and Levine (1999) describe a residential learning community to be a living space that incorporates intentional academic programs.

More important than the structure of learning communities is the impact on institutions of higher education using them. Learning communities offer opportunities for faculty, staff and student development, as well as, spur the development of better teaching methods (Smith, MacGregor, Matthews & Gabelnick, 2004). However, the learning communities provide students with the opportunity for greater academic success and satisfaction (Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto, 1999; Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Recent research suggests the greatest impact is on student persistence, or decision to stay in school through graduation (Gabelnick, MacGregor, Matthews, & Smith, 1990; Pike, Schroeder, & Berry, 1997; Tinto, 1998). This is important when considering the degree of success that students have when making the transition from high school into their undergraduate school.

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Instructors designed the L3C to support a broad range of student needs while focusing on one specific interest, leadership. With that, the intent of the L3C was to provide students with an environment that fostered their personal leadership development.

## Leadership Development

So, why leadership? Leadership education has one goal, “to provide opportunities for people to learn the skills, attitudes, and concepts necessary to become effective leaders” (Huber, 2002, p. 27). However, most agree that leadership is often learned by experience (Hirst, Mann, Bain, Pirola-Merlo & Richver, 2004).

Dewey (1938) provided that true learning is best achieved when we are able to combine academic learning with experientially-based learning. Learning communities offer a unique way for students to experience academic content, while providing them with support (Zhao & Kuh, 2004).

Hirst, et al. (2004) concluded leaders learn when presented with challenging work, solving complex problems, leading a team, but additionally, that they foster communication and enhance team performance. Solving problems, leading teams, and communicating are important attributes of a leader and have been found in research assessing student leadership development (Brick, 1998; Rotter, 2004; Townsend & Carter, 1983). These concepts allowed for the application of the Tuckman and Jensen Group Development Model (1977).

### How it Works

At Texas A&M University, there has been a developing concern for enhancing the first year freshmen experience. With that, the university has created the Learning Community/Freshmen Year Experience Steering Committee. The committee has set into place a standard for learning communities within Texas A&M University, including pedagogical outcomes, peer mentoring, internationalization/globalization/diversity, and curricular/co-curricular partnerships.

There are seven key components addressed by the Leadership Living Learning Community. They are: development of first year students' transition and integration within the larger university community; intentional integration of learning; creation of meaningful engagement between students and faculty; creation of opportunities for interaction with diverse students, staff, and faculty; emphasis on holistic learning outcomes in empowered, informed, and responsible learners (AACU, 2002); development of students' ability and construction of new knowledge and knowledge of self in relationship to a larger community; and development of social and academic support networks which will support their transition into and through the learning experience (Texas A&M University, 2005).

The Freshmen Leadership Living Learning Community experience is a one year commitment of first year freshmen students residing in on campus housing. The university offers this optional program specifying the key benefits, as outlined in this paper, to incoming freshmen.

Students choosing to participate in the Freshmen Leadership Living Learning Community live in on-campus residence halls, register for courses designed for their cohort, and participate in a diverse set of co-curricular activities centered on their academic learning. The programs offered to students are the result of a partnership established between the Department of Residence Life and the Department of Agricultural Education. By linking these two departments there is the opportunity to provide students with a safe environment, in which to live, learn and become engaged with their leadership development.

Faculty developed the structure of the L3C using Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) small-group development model. The model, which is a five step process, includes Forming (testing and dependence of the group), Storming (intragroup conflict), Norming (development of group

cohesion), Performing (functional role readiness) and Adjourning (group termination). Faculty were able to develop an academic syllabus, including co-curricular activities, which complemented the Tuckman and Jensen model.

The text *Learning to Lead* (Bennis and Goldsmith, 2003) provided the academic content. The co-curricular activities followed the pedagogical principle of experiential learning and reflection. The structure of the activities supported both the Tuckman and Jensen model (1977) and the Bennis and Goldsmith (2003) text.

By following this teaching methodology, faculty provide students with an academic component, a residential/community component, and a real experience. All three of these combine to create a holistic approach to education for first year freshmen in the Leadership Living Learning Community.

#### Results to Date

After the first year of the L3C the instructors have made some general observations about the program.

#### Program Participation

Applications were sent to every student accepted at Texas A&M University for the Fall 2005, who also accepted on-campus residence. Of these 3000 contacted, 84 applied. Of the 84 applications, 62 were accepted. All of the 62 students were from Texas. Of these, there were a total of 38 female residents and 24 male residents. One factor that was unaccounted for in the application and screening process was the number of credits a student would be entering the university with. Of the students enrolled in Fall 2005, 9 came in with no credits, 6 came in with 12, and one student reported a total of 63 credit hours.

At the end of Fall 2005 semester the program experienced students dropping the program for a total of eight. There were four who dropped the program after the first week, these students reported they were unaware of the number of activities planned and were afraid of missing classes. These students were on a pre-professional track. At the close of the semester, the student carrying 63 credits dropped, due to the increasing course load as a Junior. Prior to the beginning of the Spring semester three more dropped for various reasons.

### Program Activities

The class met on a weekly basis for a 50 minute class period. During the course of the semester, topics were covered from the Bennis and Goldsmith (2003) text. As topics were covered in-hall workshops were designed specifically to complement the content and facilitated by graduate students in the Agricultural Education Department.

In addition to the classroom content, co-curricular activities were developed. The following summarizes each of the experience and the facilitation process.

In week one, students were guided through the Forming phase of Tuckman and Jensen's small group development model (1977). In this phase, students became acquainted with one another and creating relationships with other students. With that, the Ropes Course was chosen as a means to facilitate dialogue and trust among the students.

Academically students are being exposed to terminology and the role leadership will play in their futures, Chapter 1 of Bennis and Goldsmith (2003). Students are beginning to reach a common level of understanding, which will stabilize through the course of the semester.

Week two presented the challenges the Storming phase. This phase is often accompanied with feelings of insecurity and anxiety about the newly developing relationships. This phase covered three chapters of the course text, but the umbrella emphasis was for students to begin a

self-awareness and self-recognition process. These two concepts associated with Emotional Intelligence provided students with tools to become better team mates, better leaders and better learners.

The activities included an E”RAS”E (Encouraging Respect, Acceptance, and Support through Education) program, to assist students in understanding the role of diversity in leadership and facing their own thoughts and feelings about diversity. The L3C partnered with the Office of International Programs to sponsor an Eating International Potluck. The intent of this program was to heighten their exposure to international cuisine and culture. At program conclusion students were asked to reflect on their experience.

The second planned activity for this phase was the StrengthsQuest™. StrengthsQuest™ leads each student in a discovery of his or her natural talents, and to unique and valuable insights into developing those talents into strengths. The student becomes better equipped to succeed, and to make effective decisions that enable him or her to balance the demands of class work with extra-curricular activities, job, and family (Gallup, 2005).

Half-way through the Fall Semester students entered the Norming phase. This phase, characterized by group development and cohesion, is often called the “Harmony” phase. At this time, students explored topics related to communication, trust and integrity. The first cocurricular activity students participated in was a day long trip to Austin, the state capital. Students were visited by the Former Speaker of the Texas House of Representatives, Pete Laney, along with two other state representatives.

The second day-long trip was to the Johnson Space Center in Houston. This trip specifically addresses the long history of the space program and what it has meant to maintain

the vision of the space program, even through difficult times. Upon return students were asked to reflect upon their experience.

The fourth phase was Performing. It was at this time that student began to exhibit the merits of working through each of the phases. They had ample time to become acquainted, develop relationships, work on open honest communication and trust. The cocurricular activity for this segment focused on the George Bush Presidential Library. The library was selected due to its fit with the chapter addressing, “Realizing intention through action.” President Bush’s life depiction showed a gentleman who worked hard and strived to be a leader. This allowed students to see that our fullest potential to develop as a leader is often a result of many small wins. After the tour, students had guided discussion reflecting on their thoughts and feelings.

In concluding the semester, students worked through the final stage of Tuckman and Jensen’s (1977) small group development model, Adjourning. This phase concludes the relationship which ended in a celebration. The final academic curriculum addresses evaluating success and creating evaluations. Students learned techniques and strategies for evaluating success of leadership and reflected on what the L3C experience meant to them in their quest for leadership. A banquet was held honoring and celebrating the accomplishments of all the students and faculty.

The second semester, Spring 2006, allowed for a much different application of the program. The students having completed one semester of courses and one semester of their leadership development curricula were faced with a new challenge. The task the instructors set before them was that of practice. All 54 students who selected to stay in the L3C, were enrolled in a class focused on peer mentoring. Using the text, *Students Helping Students* (Ender &

Newton, 2000), the one-hour a week curriculum was alternated with a hands-on mentoring project.

A partnership was developed with a local elementary school and the 54 L3C students were paired with younger girls and boys for a mentoring project. The L3C students had the opportunity to work with students either in school or as part of a soccer team. This experience allowed them to practice mentoring with the intent to prepare them for peer mentoring during their second L3C year, if they so chose.

Applications for year two are being prepared and the program is currently in the process of making adjustments in order to meet the needs of the second year students. The following section will provide for additional discussion.

#### Conclusions and Recommendations

There is nothing quite like the first year of a new university initiative. Looking back and taking all the learning opportunities in stride, the instructors do feel the first year was a success. Some of the first conclusions made about the success of the program deal primarily with retention of student participants. In the initial development of the L3C instructors planned for near 100 students. After completing the first year the instructors realized the complexity of the program, including co-curricular activities would have been difficult to accomplish with such a large number.

Second, the text book chosen, although seemingly appropriate at the time of selection was said by students to be, “too juvenile.” With that, the workbook nature of the text did not lend it self well to the freshmen students. Feedback also noted that the scenarios used throughout the text were not relevant and difficult to translate into something appropriate for the age of the students.

What was found was that the students enjoyed activities which provided them the opportunity to socialize and interact. From the Ropes Course to the International Potluck and the day-long excursion, the students seem to gain more from these experiences than anything provided in the book. However, it was noted by the instructors that the reflections of their experiences did reiterate the content being discussed in class from the text.

Another key area that was not examined fully enough during the planning phases was the use of Resident Hall Assistants and additional evening programming taking place in the residence halls. Instructors and staff feel short in this area, leaving the students with a great area of need. This is being taken into consideration for planning year two.

Baseline data is currently being collected to provide additional information as to the quantifiable success of the program. This includes leadership development using the Leadership Skills Inventory (Townsend, 1983), GPR calculation, persistence and campus involvement.

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