

Filling the Student Development Gap for Undergraduates in Agriculture

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Introduction

Colleges of agriculture in the United States have contributed significantly to the achievements of their graduates, but have not provided enough opportunities for leadership development (Love & Yoder, 1989). Today's agricultural industry demands a high standard from college graduates, and employers are increasingly seeking them out to be effective leaders in their companies and organizations (McKinley, Birkenholz, & Stewart, 1993). Employers therefore desire leadership ability from employees, especially in problem solving and team work (Andelt, Barrett, and Bosshamer, 1997). However, Graham found that teamwork, decision-making, leadership, and initiative were areas in need of improvement among graduates (Graham, 2001). This presents a need for colleges of agriculture to provide opportunities at the college level for students to participate in leadership development activities to more effectively prepare them for success upon graduation.

The College of Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs) at the University of Florida sought to fill this gap with a program for students that would compliment the opportunities that already exist at the college level, such as participation in student organizations and student governing councils. The program would address the challenges faced by students in their current role as a college student and also prepare them for their future role in a career. In essence, what could we provide the students of our college that will make them more effective individuals and more successful professionals? The answer to this came in the form of a student development series called Solutions Seminars.

Background

Day (2001) states that "the lessons learned from traditional classroom development programs do not last much beyond the end of the program," saying that little change actually occurs as a result of participation in the program. Rather, students ought be engaged in the process of action learning, where individuals can most effectively learn by working on current organization problems (Revans, 1980). In the context of leadership development programs for college students, these problems come in the form of the daily challenges that students face as they progress through their academic program and prepare for a future career.

Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001) described four hallmarks of effective leadership development programs as context, philosophy, common practices, and sustainability. Included in the description of these hallmarks were inputs from many sources, the development of self-awareness, an emphasis on the potential of all people to lead, an evaluation process, and student recognition of growth (Cress et al., 2001).

Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt (1999) found that students who participated in leadership development programs were much more likely to “report significant changes on the measured leadership outcomes of increased self-understanding, ability to set goals, sense of ethics, willingness to take risks, civic responsibility, multicultural awareness, community orientation, and a variety of leadership skills” when compared with non-participants (Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999).

How It Works

Solutions Seminars are hosted as one-day conferences offered free of charge to all CALS students. Currently there is one Solutions Seminar each semester. Each seminar’s program focuses on different challenge areas for students. The first seminar, held in October 2006, addressed finding balance in one’s life. The spring semester seminar, held in February 2007, focused on building effective leadership skills.

Eight workshops are held at each seminar and students choose four of the eight to attend. Workshop topics are created that will achieve the overall focus for the day. Presenters are found within the college, university, community, and industry that are experts in each topic area.

An online registration process is used to plan for the event. CALS students are emailed announcements about the upcoming seminar and encouraged to register. Program staff also visits large survey classes within the college to inform students about the opportunity.

The seminars are held at a nearby conference facility and begin on a Saturday morning with an opening session that welcomes the participants, provides information about the day’s event, and provides a time to meet other participants through a networking activity. Students next choose two of four 45-minute concurrent workshops to attend in the morning. A brief lunch program includes a luncheon speaker, either motivational in nature or a CALS alumni who exemplifies effective leadership. Students then attend another two of four concurrent workshops of their choice in the afternoon. The seminar is closed with door prizes that enable students to apply the principles learned that day, such as gym memberships to promote healthy lifestyles and registration waivers to attend advanced leadership training programs. Breakfast, lunch, and refreshments are provided, as well as a certificate of completion from the Dean’s office.

The second seminar also included incentives for CALS student organizations to encourage club officers to participate. This approach offered specialized club officer training and development to clubs that registered eight or more executive team members for Solutions Seminar.

Results to Date

Seventy students at the University of Florida participated in the first Solutions Seminar held in Fall 2006. Participation grew to more 110 students in the Spring 2007 seminar. Two

student organizations participated in the specialized training offered to club officers in the spring seminar.

Workshops topics have included financial management, personal brand marketing, time management, decision-making skills, effective professional communication, stress management, program planning, team leadership, healthy lifestyles, career networking, and servant leadership. Workshop presenters have donated their time in facilitating dynamic workshops targeted to student needs.

The following information was gathered from a web-based evaluation completed by participants after each seminar.

		<i>Fall 2006</i> <i>n = 30</i>	<i>Spring 2007</i> <i>n = 62</i>
Participants by gender	<i>Female</i>	66.7%	74.2%
	<i>Male</i>	33.3%	25.8%
Participation by classification	<i>Freshman</i>	3.3%	3.2%
	<i>Sophomore</i>	3.3%	11.3%
	<i>Junior</i>	23.3%	27.4%
	<i>Senior</i>	36.7%	29.0%
	<i>Graduate student</i>	16.7%	22.6%
	<i>Other, including all students from other colleges within UF</i>	16.7%	6.5%
Seminar impact	<i>The seminar was relevant and valuable</i>	4.45/5.00	4.38/5.00
	<i>The seminar improved my personal effectiveness as a student</i>	4.07/5.00	4.07/5.00
	<i>The seminar aided in my professional and career development</i>	4.28/5.00	4.12/5.00
	<i>Overall rating</i>	4.37/5.00	4.44/5.00

Selected comments from student evaluations:

- *I thought all the speakers and presenters did an outstanding job. I walked out of there with a change of heart in some aspects of my daily life. I have been inspired to work out, write a resume and search my heart for what really matters. I discovered some dislikes and likes about me and want to do the best I can to always be inspired. I don't know how to repay your kindness and opportunity. Thank you very much.*
- *I thought it was a great conference and I am already utilizing some of the practices I learned.*

Conclusions/Recommendations

Based on student evaluations, students feel that participation in Solutions Seminars has increased their personal effectiveness and their career readiness. Students have stated that this seminar model fits a gap they have experienced in their personal and professional development.

Although the program was developed primarily for undergraduates, many graduate students participated in the seminars and found many pieces quite valuable. Therefore, future plans involve assessing the needs of graduate students and how they can be served with such programs. While there were noticeably fewer underclassmen participating in the seminars, it should be noted that underclassmen represent only 23% of the student population in the college. However, more efforts should be placed on encouraging men in the college to participate.

One approach for future seminars may be to provide tracks of workshops that are more focused on the specific development needs of underclassmen, upperclassmen, and graduate students. Another concept involves “add-on’s” that would be available after the regular program, such as the specialized training for club officers. Other add-ons could include advanced public speaking, practice interviews, personal leadership style assessments, or practice in meeting management techniques.

Other considerations for future seminars will include creative means of advertising and appropriate scheduling. Scheduling an event that intends to reach a broad audience can be difficult. Until the series becomes an institutionalized event for students, recruitment efforts will remain a priority.

While this particular program is offered at the college level, the concepts and structure are easily transferable and relevant to other audiences. This program model could readily be used within a department, for a student organization looking to host such an event, or by academic programs that may integrate pieces into their curriculum.

References

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