

Measuring the Effectiveness of Student Leadership Programs

A Framework for Assessing Student Leadership

BY KIM E. VANDERLINDEN

The development of student leadership capacity is included in the mission, vision, and objective statements of many colleges and universities. Research shows that valid instruments to measure leadership development are limited, and most colleges and universities lack a comprehensive method to assess leadership learning and development. Many of the current instruments only allow institutions to gain insight into how programs and services affect self-selected student leaders or those students already involved in leadership programs. To comprehensively assess leadership development across campus, a broader number of students with a variety of leadership experiences must be included in assessment initiatives.

While Dennis Roberts and Bill Faulkner, in their adaptation of findings by C. Brungardt and C. B. Crawford published in *The Journal of Leadership Studies* in 1996, initially put forth an assessment framework for leadership programming, the framework has broader implications:

- Tracking of participation in various activities, programs, and organizations.
- Student reaction to leadership development programs, courses, and other related initiatives, with questions that focus on satisfaction with opportunities to develop leadership skills.
- Knowledge/learning about leadership theories, models, and concepts that explore student definitions. Questions might ask students to define different theories of leadership or the historical development of leadership studies.
- Leadership self-awareness of personal characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses, where students express perceptions of whether they demonstrate certain characteristics. For example, students might be asked to rate their skills in problem solving, communication, and their ability to inspire others.
- Corollary impacts or measurable outcomes for students, organizations or institutions, and the community. For individuals, corollary impacts might include degree attainment, achievement of personal goals, and achievement of educational goals. For institutions, leadership development initiatives might have an impact on the institutional culture and environment and result in the addition or enhancement of programs and services.
- Measuring changes in behavior before and after an experience. A large number of leadership assessments and surveys document student behavior, yet the majority of these assessments ask students to self-report their behaviors and are only indirect measures of behavior. The literature reveals several behaviors that pertain to leadership such as maintaining consistency, taking ownership,

nurturing personal relationships, and practicing ethical decisionmaking.

Populations to Assess

Three different populations of students should be assessed to holistically study and understand leadership development:

- A random sample of the general student population.
- Students intentionally seeking leadership knowledge through educational pursuits or those students participating in leadership programs or workshops.
- Students identified as leaders or those in active leadership positions, including student government members and employees.

These three different student populations are each distinct assessment targets for institutions. In addition, alumni and employers of graduates are important constituencies to consider when assessing student leadership development.

Assessment and Benchmarking Opportunities

Leadership development can take place in the classroom, in co-curricular activities, or in the community. The Leadership Institute at Miami University (Ohio), with support from StudentVoice, is creating a flexible and customizable leadership development assessment instrument to allow institutions to assess leadership at a variety of different points and with diverse populations. This study would not be designed to prove a certain theory or framework, but would provide institutions with an instrument that can be applied to measure leadership across many student populations and across particular programs or initiatives.

A committee of experts in the field of leadership studies/development has convened to develop question sets that would be appropriate for benchmarking and would become the accepted standard by which to measure college student leadership. Within question sets, institutions can still opt in and out of sections or add questions depending on their goals.

For additional information on the pilot study, set to begin in spring 2006, e-mail info@studentvoice.com.

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