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The development of student leadership through student government and student organizations

Abstract

According to Wilton Pruitt (1965), Dean of Student Personnel Services at Trenton State College, "leadership is a functional complex of attitudes, sensitivity, and skill, rather than a special ability held by an elect few" (p. 35). Too often, people are elected to an office and are quickly, without question, identified as leaders. Whether it is on a college campus or in city government, winning an election does not qualify one as a leader. A leader is one with the ability to function effectively in groups and to motivate others. More specifically, leadership is, as defined by Mabey (1985), "... being able to relate effectively to others, being highly productive, and being directed toward making a contribution to society in an arena of one's choice" (p. 5).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT LEADERSHIP
THROUGH STUDENT GOVERNMENT AND STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

A Research Paper
Presented to
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According to Wilton Pruitt (1965), Dean of Student Personnel Services at Trenton State College, "leadership is a functional complex of attitudes, sensitivity, and skill, rather than a special ability held by an elect few" (p. 35). Too often, people are elected to an office and are quickly, without question, identified as leaders. Whether it is on a college campus or in city government, winning an election does not qualify one as a leader. A leader is one with the ability to function effectively in groups and to motivate others. More specifically, leadership is, as defined by Mabey (1985), "...being able to relate effectively to others, being highly productive, and being directed toward making a contribution to society in an arena of one's choice" (p. 5).

Historically, higher education has and continues to give attention to student leadership development. Newton (1975), for example, stated: "Developing more effective student leadership, both through the enhancement of facilitative and consultative skills of professional staff and through the direct training of student leaders, has been identified as a high-priority goal on many college campuses" (p. 422). Higher

education is focusing on the well-rounded education of the student, and leadership skills development has emerged as an important component.

The purpose of this paper is to review literature pertinent to selected issues of student leadership development in higher education. More specifically, this paper will focus on the goals and objectives of student leadership programs, development of leadership skills through student government and leadership conferences, and broadening the leadership base.

Goals and Objectives of Student Leadership Programs

Students matriculating in American higher education should be exposed to experiences that enhance their holistic development. As Clark (1985) indicated:

College must challenge students to develop their capabilities to the fullest, to learn how organizations function and can be led, and to understand the necessity for accommodating the interest of others while maintaining high ideals for one's society and one's own conduct. (p. 14)

Extracurricular activities are not simply to occupy a student's attention until class begins but are provided to benefit the overall development of the

student. Relative to the educational aims of student leadership programs, Frederick (1965) identified several objectives: responsibility, initiative, leadership, fellowship, self-control, self-reliance, cooperation, respect for law and order, honesty, obedience to law, and effective citizenship. The above objectives cannot be approached like introductory courses in mathematics and biology, but the objectives must be attained by some means. Higher education has a responsibility to its students, a responsibility to address the development of their leadership skills. As Ritter and Brown (1986) pointed out:

Leadership development is an area that has become a key focus for business and politics, and is finally coming of age in higher education. An increasingly larger number of colleges and universities have instituted some form of leadership program, and some are quite extensive.

(p. 3)

The methods employed to develop leadership programs are certain to vary. Just as the characteristics of the student body on various campuses differ, so will the leadership development

programs. What should not differ is the general mission of leadership programs. According to Janonik and Sina (1988),

Effective leadership programs can produce a number of important outcomes, such as increasing students' skills for living, contributing to increased productivity of student leaders and student organizations, improving the mental and physical well-being of participants, and improving the rate of student retention by contributing to a supportive and nurturing environment. (p. 16)

Furr and Lutz (1987) opined that if university administrators value strong student organizations, they must enhance the development of student leaders. This confirms the notion that student organizations are vehicles for student leadership development. These organizations give students the opportunity to form and clarify values and to acquire human relations skills. In addition, these organizations provide the opportunity for positive, healthy, and mature students to serve as role models to other students. This encourages student participation and provides the opportunity for students to acquire practical experience as responsible group leaders. With this experience base, they will become more confident

leaders and their desire to take on additional challenges in other positions will grow. In the words of Pruitt (1965):

Yet the values derived from having students work through the evolution of the total ideas in which they have responsibility of proposing plans, evaluating, rejecting and accepting ideas, and resolving the multiple responsibilities results in an understanding of purposes and objectives and a commitment of the total plan which cannot be obtained in any other way. (p. 38)

Understanding the intricacies of leadership is important to students' skill development. If they are introduced to the skills of leadership, and given opportunities through student organizations to develop those skills, these students will be well prepared to serve in leadership positions.

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS THROUGH STUDENT GOVERNMENT AND LEADERSHIP CONFERENCES

Student groups are nonstructural or structural in form. The nonstructural group may be comprised of students eating lunch together regularly, socializing at the union, or simply chatting in the library. Although nonstructural student groups may have a considerable effect on the student's development, the

focus of this paper is on the structural form of student groups. It is here where organized groups like student government associations emerge.

Student government is a structured and organized student group, a place for students to be heard and to exercise their right to participate in university affairs. Klopff (1960) defined the purpose of student government:

An immediate purpose of student government is to provide a means whereby students may organize so as to be able to participate effectively in those functions of a college or university which directly affect their social, economic, physical, and intellectual welfare. (p. 47)

Today, there is a student government association of some type, at virtually every postsecondary institution in the county. These organizations commonly have an executive and legislative branch, and an established constitution. The constitution normally defines the duties of officers, organizational objectives, and operating procedures. As student government seeks to fulfill its mission, it also identifies potential leaders. The student government serves as a vehicle for training

students in the skills of leadership. Students are given responsibility, through interaction with peers and professional staff, to deal with problems and represent their fellow student. According to Klopff (1960), "The experiences they seek are not just experiences, but opportunities for the development of skills and techniques of group leadership as well as an understanding of human relations" (p. 30). By conducting the operations of student government, students are charged with maintaining accurate files, holding meetings, posting and honoring office hours, and various other administrative tasks. These students could be called student government leadership trainees. By successfully conducting the operation of a student government, they are being trained for future leadership positions. These students are exposed to parliamentary debates, public speaking, and policy making. They are often members of university committees and community committees, working with people who have a wealth of experience from which to draw. Experiences like these provide students with the opportunity to improve their leadership techniques by following the examples of role models.

There are alternative means of developing student leadership. One of the most successful is leadership

conferences. These conferences provide the opportunity for students to exercise the knowledge and basic skill of leadership. Goldenberg and Simons (1979) identified basic communication skills, decision making skills, problem solving techniques, parliamentary procedure, and group process as some of the essential components for effective student leadership.

Student leadership workshops function in the context of a leadership conference. The workshops operate in small group sessions held for students and administrators to discuss relevant issues in depth. These workshops collectively form the leadership conference. The workshop group has a responsibility to address its area of interest and to make recommendations to the conference body, meaning that the small group sessions are not just a place to complain but to create solutions. Also, the group is assigned a leader who helps the group discuss issues without influencing its decision. As Klopff (1960) explained:

The group leader serves chiefly to help clarify questions, to make sure that there is maximum participation, to ask thought-provoking questions, to restate unclear points, to help participants

distinguish facts from conjectures, and to encourage a good feeling in the group. (p. 34)

After the small group sessions are concluded, the findings of each group are presented to the leadership conference for further discussion. Each workshop group may be challenged to explain and justify its recommendations. The high level of discussion concerning student issues is a reason why leadership conferences are successful. For the two or three day period of the conference, all attention is on student concerns. Moreover, this intense environment is an excellent opportunity for students to exercise and sharpen their leadership skills and to observe other students and professionals in a formal setting.

Broadening the Leadership Base

Leadership ability is a valuable asset. If students are introduced to the basic skills in their collegiate years, these skills can be mastered by the students for future use in their personal and professional lives. This means that students should be given the opportunity to learn these skills in college. Moreover, this means all students must be given the chance. The author agrees with Young that minorities and women must develop the competencies necessary for effective leadership if America is to prosper from the

wealth of all of its human resources. These groups have for too long been seriously underrepresented in the leadership development process. America cannot afford to deny leadership opportunities to women and ethnic minorities. The world of the present and the future is growing more diverse. The American society is multi-cultural, with the percentage population of Blacks, Hispanics, and Asians increasing. Leadership programs must be offered to these groups, because they have a significant role in the future of this country.

Dr. Glenda Earwood-Smith, Assistant Dean of Students at Southeast Missouri State University, contends that leadership positions in student organizations provide excellent training ground for students, but she questions the leadership involvement of women in these organizations. Earwood-Smith (1985) observed that although women and men have been found equally effective in leadership roles, women are seldom found in the role of leader in society. She further stated that this pattern is consistent in student organizations. Bernstein and Shanlik (1986) interviewed four female student government presidents on the issue of women as student leaders. When questioned about what needs to be done in terms of women's advancement, one of the women said:

We have to network, and as women specifically, not so much as individuals, and we do that among other reasons for our own self-protection. But the word gets out that we need to do that, and we're instantly branded. (p. 46)

She was referring to being "branded" as a feminist. In a position of leadership, one must lead the entire group. A woman student government president who is stereotyped as a feminist will have difficulty representing the entire student body. At any rate, women must assert themselves and meet the challenge of their male counterparts. This will undoubtedly be stressful. However, the skills needed to meet this challenge are the skills of leadership. Thus, leadership training can assist in preparing women to deal with discrimination.

It is interesting to note that of those four female student government presidents, only one was a minority. This is not surprising, because minorities are too often left out of the leadership development process. This voluntary or involuntary exclusion may be due to the fact that some minority students are alienated and not in the mainstream activity of the university. To eliminate such situations, organizations like the Mid-America Association of

Educational Opportunity Program Personnel (MAEOPP) are formed. MAEOPP seeks to provide equal opportunities for minorities and women to develop their leadership ability. In addition, an annual conference is held where minority students participate in a series of workshops. In these student participation workshops, a strong emphasis is placed on leadership development. Students are instructed by professional facilitators and given the opportunity to ask any and all questions. Although these conferences are excellent learning experiences, they are not enough. What these students need is active and continuous encouragement, similar to what is offered at MAEOPP conferences. Many campuses have a Black Student Union or Ethnic Cultural Center, but these facilities are often underfunded and understaffed. Through Black Student Unions and Ethnic Cultural Center, much can be done to encourage and motivate minority students. Minority students are not often encouraged to participate in organizations where they will be one of a kind. These students need to be encouraged and given more alternatives that will provide leadership training. Funding minority organizations is a good place to begin.

Conclusion

The author has investigated the importance of student leadership and found it a valuable part of higher education. Janosik and Sina (1988), among others, pointed out: leadership training is an essential part of many student development/student involvement programs and will continue to make important contributions to the quality of student life on college campuses. The training encourages students to strive for the best that life has to offer.

Although the time spent in college is normally only four to five years, the leadership training provided can have a permanent impact. It is during the college years that young adults can shape their value system, become self-reliant, and take responsibility for their lives. "Higher education must prepare young men and women for exceptional responsibilities, both in their work and in their citizenship" (Nelson, 1953, p. 132). This preparation must not be narrow in focus. A well integrated, broad-based education is necessary. The purpose, according to Nelson, is:

to teach them (students) how to think; to communicate; to analyze, to criticize, to judge, to decide; to be familiar with basic facts and

ideas; to cultivate their curiosity and to release their powers of creativity; to have them learn to learn. (p. 131)

Leadership training should be a part of the education process of today's student and those of the future. If our nation is to excel in a pluralistic society, the future generation must be prepared. This is a challenge for American higher education.

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