Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership

The Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) is an annual, national survey of leadership development among college students. It explores the role of higher education in developing leadership capacities with a special focus on specific environmental conditions that foster leadership development. MSL is conducted in partnership with the National Clearinghouse of Leadership Programs (NCLP).

The MSL examines student leadership values at both the institutional and national levels with specific attention to the campus experience factors that influence leadership development in college students. The theoretical framework is the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (HERI, 1996), which is the leadership model that the student affairs division chose as our foundation for student leadership development programming following a year-long study in 2007.

We administered the MSL in spring 2009. All undergraduates were invited to participate via a web survey; we realized a 37.5% response rate. Our responses are compared to general outcome measures in five peer groups: national, small, private, masters and secular. The national sample was 338,732 from over 100 colleges and universities.

Key research questions:

- How do college students score on the eight leadership values associated with the Social Change Model?
- How do scores compare across particular demographic factors, such as gender, race/ethnicity, and class-standing?
- What environmental factors (e.g., co-curricular involvement, study abroad) contribute to higher scores on the leadership outcomes?

Interesting general findings:

- Percentage of students identifying as GLBT is over 10%, more than double the national sample and every peer group we chose to compare ourselves to.
- There is a positive relationship between GPA and leadership change across all measures.
- Greatest change at AU is in the category of “consciousness of self.”
- Students who report themselves as very liberal score highest in all leadership categories; moderate lowest, except CHANGE where very conservative students score lowest.
- Students with disabilities report significantly lower leadership scores across all categories except Controversy with Civility, where they score higher than students without disabilities.
- No significant differences reported when comparing transfer status, age (trad/non-trad), or first generation/non-first gen.

Students who had the following experiences reported a significant growth in leadership outcomes, compared to those who did not:

- Internship experience (all measures)
• Undergraduate research (commitment, collaboration, controversy with civility, citizenship, change)
• Senior capstone (collaboration, common purpose, citizenship, omnibus)
• Community Service (all measures)
• Academic/Professional student groups (except controversy with civility)
• Honor societies (except controversy with civility)
• Orientation guides (except collaboration)
• Resident Assistants (all measures) **this is one of the only areas where this growth is also significantly higher at AU than our peer institutions.
• Peer Leaders (all measures)
• Religious groups (only in the areas of common purpose, congruence and citizenship)
• Service organizations (only in the areas of collaboration, common purpose and citizenship)
• Student governance (all areas except congruence and commitment)

These experiences showed a lesser impact – or none – on leadership outcomes:
• Study Abroad (none of the eight measures)
• First year experience program (only increased consciousness of self)
• Off-campus and on-campus employment (none)
• Art, theatre and music student groups (only controversy with civility and citizenship)
• Identity-based student groups (only controversy with civility and citizenship)
• Media organizations (only common purpose and citizenship)
• Political organizations (only controversy with civility and citizenship)
• Intercollegiate sports (only controversy with civility)
• Intramural sports (only collaboration)
• Club sports (none)

Interesting findings from our custom questions:
• 55% of our students enjoy outdoor activities now more than they did in high school.
• Students who work on-campus say the skills they developed most as a result are communication skills (21%), interpersonal skills (13%) and strong work ethic (13%)
• Students who participate in clubs/organizations say the three most important benefits are making new friends (74%), improved self confidence (48%) and better leadership skills (43%)
• 94% of our students believe they can work effectively with people who are very different from themselves.
• 58% disagreed with the statement “it’s hard to think of myself as a leader when most recognized leaders look/act so different than me.”

Even without detailed analysis of this very rich dataset, we can easily identify some initial goals. Here are some general takeaways:
• Taking all factors into account, our outcomes are closest to our peers in “controversy with civility” and “change.” In every other factor, we are slightly behind
• Our students show the most growth from senior year in high school to college in the area of “consciousness of self” and overall confidence in their own leadership skills (moderate effect sizes)
• Some of our programs are extremely successful in growing leaders (e.g. RA job, peer mentoring, OG job, internship experience, community service, majoring in social service areas).
• Some of our programs need to focus more on leadership development, if that is a goal of the program (intercollegiate, club and rec sports; study abroad; most of our academic majors; on-campus employment; FYE program)
The student affairs division is going to engage in some additional research and analysis of our MSL results. We plan to proceed from a strengths-based platform: first, we need to determine what we can learn about the environments at AU that provide great leadership outcomes for our students. Once we understand some of those successes, we can apply our findings to the areas that have not done that as well in providing student leadership growth through the development of some reasonable student learning outcomes. We tentatively plan to administer the MSL again in two years to see how we did.