

University Center

Assessment of: 1) student perspective on campus involvement; 2) campus leadership development

ABSTRACT

Studies have indicated that high levels of involvement in non-academic activities at the collegiate level improve student development in a number of areas, including personal and educational. The University Center (UC) undertook this assessment to understand the tendencies, attitudes, and desires of UM students regarding leadership development and student involvement. The focus was on how these attitudes affect the Student Involvement and Leadership Development (SILD) department at the UC at UM. The SILD strives to provide students with opportunities for extracurricular involvement. Two-hundred ninety-six students in several general education classes at UM were given an original paper survey consisting of twenty-six questions regarding their past, present, and future involvement in student groups and leadership programs, what activities they were interested in, and how they would describe “leadership” and being a “leader”. These results were then analyzed to determine common interests and themes that could be applied to the SILD and UM’s leadership and involvement programs in general. The results suggest that the marketing efforts of the SILD’s programs must educate students as to the benefits of leadership and extra-curricular involvement in order to attract and successfully involve students in activities on campus. In addition, the study suggests that some programs need to be modified to suit the needs of today’s UM students.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Theory of involvement contends that the amount of energy—both physical and psychological—that students expend at their institution positively affects their development during college. Students who are involved in campus life also devote considerable energy to their academic programs, spend considerable time on campus, participate actively in student organizations, and interact frequently with other students. Campus activities is one of the vehicles for involving students with the institution.¹

As indicated above, students who are involved on campus benefit personally and contribute to the institution they attend by increasing their own development and the strength of the student atmosphere of the university. Alexander Astin, who has developed and worked extensively with student involvement theory, observed that, “a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students.” He went on to say that learning in an educational environment is directly proportional to the “quantity and quality” of involvement in a particular program.²

¹ *Campus Activities Program*, CAS Standards and Guidelines (2002):51.

² Astin, A., “Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education,” *Journal of College Student Development* 40 (Sept/Oct 1999): 518-29.

The motivation behind this study was two-fold. It came from an interest in furthering the SILD programming in the UC at The University of Montana for the benefit of students. Improving these programs can be achieved by determining the interests of UM students with regard to campus activities. As the purpose of this programming is to cater to the needs of students, it is important to assess those needs. This project is an attempt to discover those needs and, consequently, find ways to satisfy them.

The SILD resides in the University Center. The UC follows the guidelines of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education. In the Campus Activities Program section of standards and guidelines, campus activities programs are to "...incorporate student learning and student development".³ In support of academic programs, the following purposes are laid out:

*The purposes must enhance the overall educational experiences of students through development of, exposure to, and participation in social, cultural, multicultural, intellectual, recreational, community service, and campus governance programs.*⁴

In addition, the guidelines state that, "campus activities programs should be planned and implemented collaboratively by students, professional staff and faculty."⁵ Currently, campus activities programs in the UC are a collaborative effort between student coordinators, staff, and faculty. Many programs also have advisory boards that consist of students, staff, and faculty. The UC houses one or more programs that fit in each of the categories laid out above, including the Multicultural Alliance, Special and Annual Events, Ursa Major leadership programs, The Associated Students of The University of Montana (ASUM), and others. However, programs such as Ursa Major have seen minimal student participation. Many lecture and video series also record low numbers of participation. Though the count of participants is not a complete indicator of success or failure of a program, maximizing the impact of each program on students to enhance their learning is important. In summary, the purpose of this study was to determine how best to maximize the impact of our programs in terms of attracting students and delivering programs of interest and educational enhancement.

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE

Researchers distributed a paper survey consisting of 26 questions to students in four general education classes at The University of Montana; 297 surveys were returned. One survey was disregarded due to lack of response. Two questions were problematic due to misinterpretation: question 5 disregarded 72 surveys for a total of 224 responses; question 25 disregarded 68 surveys for a total of 228 responses. Survey questions were both quantitative and qualitative.

Researchers analyzed the results of the survey to determine common interests and themes. For instance, 81% of students who had been in leadership programs, both class and non-class related, believed they were better able to contribute to other groups with which they were involved. Only 41% of students surveyed believed they needed leadership training now, and students reported

³ *Campus Activities Program*, CAS Standards and Guidelines (2002):51.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

that they were most interested in attending events that led to social networking and that developed their skills within their academic major.

Secondary sources were incorporated in this research to develop survey questions and conclusions^{6,7,8}. Each of these researchers and/or studies support the theory that higher levels of involvement positively benefit students in terms of educational and psychological development, as well as the campus by increasing student ties and involvement in the institution. The CAS standards were also used to define better the purpose and goals of campus activities programs with regards to the SILD. More discussion of the conclusions based on the survey in combination with these secondary sources follows.

Demographics

Of the 296 respondents, 34% reported that they were first-year students, 29% were sophomores, 20% were juniors, 15% were seniors, and 1% were graduate students. Two respondents did not report their grade level. The age distribution included 58% that were 18-20 years old, 27% that were 21-22 years old, 6% that were 23-24 years old, and 9% 25 years of age or older. Respondents represented a wide variety of majors; the highest concentrations were in business (including accounting, finance, marketing, management, and information systems) at 19.3%, anthropology at 10.5%, education at 9.2%, and undeclared/undecided at 8.2%.

Theory

There are many theories on leadership: some state that leaders are born not made; others that leadership is based on inspiration. Still others claim that leadership can be learned, is based on serving others, or is best accomplished with a team. Involvement theory states that student involvement in campus activities enhances students' educational and psychological experiences, and strengthens universities as a whole.⁹

Two questions on the survey were specifically designed to assess student perceptions of leadership theory. Question 4 asked respondents to identify three to four key leadership words out of an available ten options, including 'Other.' Question 5 gave six theories listed as 'leadership definitions' that students could rank from 6 (most agree) to 1 (least agree). Respondents were asked to rank these six leadership definitions in order to determine how students view leadership.

Current leadership programs such as the Introduction to Leadership class at UM often use the team leadership theory or servant leadership theory. Team leadership theories view leadership behavior as "team-based problem solving" in which situations are analyzed as a team and

⁶ Astin, A., "Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education," *Journal of College Student Development* 40 no. 5 (1999): 518-29.

⁷ Bolden, R., Gosling, J., Marturano, A., and Dennison, P., "A Review of Leadership Theory and Competency Frameworks; Edited Version of a Report for Chase Consulting and the Management Standards Centre," Exeter: Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter: (2003).

⁸ Cress, C., Astin, H., Zimmerman-Oster, K., and Burkhardt, J., "Developmental Outcomes of College Students' Involvement in Leadership Activities," *Journal of College Student Development* 42 no. 1 (2001): 15-27.

⁹ Astin, "Student Involvement," 518-29.

approached in a manner that can best achieve team goals.¹⁰ This theory regards team leadership as shared or led by an official team leader. Servant leadership is a theory in which leaders approach their guidance of others through serving them: in this way the one served becomes a leader through inspiration and choosing to serve others.¹¹

FINDINGS

Leadership Theories

Across all grade levels, respondents ranked ‘Trait Leadership’ highest among leadership theories. Trait leadership was defined by the phrase, “Leaders are born, not made. Their characteristics and ability to lead are unchangeable and leadership traits are not teachable.” This theory was derived from Great Man Theories which state that leaders have inborn traits and that these are not learned¹². The trait theories attempted to identify exactly what these traits are, though no studies have indicated that any one or even a few traits can be pinpointed to identify a superior ‘leader.’ In this survey, 54% of freshmen, 56% of sophomores, 51% of juniors and 46% of senior respondents ranked trait leadership highest out of the six choices. These results imply that approximately half of UM’s student body believe leadership is inherent and cannot be learned. It follows, then, that these students would also not be interested in leadership programs designed to improve leadership skills, as these students would believe they inherently possess or do not possess leadership skills and cannot do anything about this. Students should be educated about leadership theory in an attempt to change this attitude, which might be best done by changing marketing strategies.

Programs

Survey question 16 asked students why they would get involved in leadership activities. Reasons such as personal development, building a resume, and career development were the predominant responses. The responses to questions 20 and 21 suggested that students are looking for programs within their majors to get involved in. The responses to question 23 demonstrated that 53% of students would like to see/would attend social programs, and 46% said they would attend service activities. The responses to question 24 identified guest lectures, dances, and musical performances as the programs that students are most interested in attending. The following analysis will focus primarily on how to improve and expand a specific program, the Center for Leadership Development (CLD) in light of these data.

In terms of programs in general, students clearly indicated their reasons for getting involved and which types of programs they would like to see/would attend. Finding ways to attract students by emphasizing the social and career developmental benefits of attending these programs may be

¹⁰ Northouse, P., *Leadership; Theory and Practice*, 4th ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc, 2007).

¹¹ Barbuto, J., Wheeler, D., “Scale Development and Construct Clarification of Servant Leadership,” *Group & Organization Management*, 31 no. 3 (2002): 3-326.

¹² Bolden, R., Gosling, J., Marturano, A., and Dennison, P., “A Review of Leadership Theory and Competency Frameworks; Edited Version of a Report for Chase Consulting and the Management Standards Centre,” Exeter: Centre for Leadership Studies, University of Exeter: (2003).

more successful than current tactics. SILD does offer programs of this nature; attracting more students may simply be a matter of pitching the programs to them from a different angle.

The CLD currently serves students by offering the Ursa Major program, an Introduction to Leadership class, and providing 'Leadership Take-Out' which allows classes or departments to host one-hour workshops on a variety of leadership topics taught by CLD personnel. Each spring, the CLD hosts a leadership conference for students consisting of a day-long series of workshops and speakers. The CLD also recognizes students and student groups through two recognition programs and a ceremony in the spring. Participation in the Ursa Major Program specifically has been consistently low in terms of actively participating students.

Based on the data provided by this survey, a different strategy for the CLD would seem to make this program more relevant. The CLD is primarily for learning, yet students indicated that they are looking for social programs, entertainment, and career development. Though the CLD does offer these benefits, its marketing strategies may not portray them effectively to students. As many students indicated, there is a desire for leadership programs within specific majors, and the CLD should be used for that purpose. The CLD would provide advice to each department on how to establish their own leadership programs to cater to students within each major. The program may become the place where students could go to find information about leadership programs and to find direction as to how to get involved in their own academic concentrations. This shift in focus requires initiative on the part of individual departments to establish their own leadership programs with the support of the CLD. It also requires additional staffing of the CLD. As this kind of program is established, the CLD should be a major presence at new student orientations as a resource to help students get involved before they begin their UM career. Such a comprehensive and campus-wide leadership program, one in which students can engage further in their concentration while still learning leadership skills, would serve to connect students with their departments and the community. The CLD should continue its own general leadership program so as not to neglect students who appreciate the Ursa Major program or have not yet decided on a major.

Marketing

Students are inundated with all kinds of information about academic programs, campus groups, events, and ways to get involved. This study demonstrated that nearly one-third of students are not at all aware of any leadership programs that are offered at UM, despite current marketing efforts.

Currently, UC marketing consists of posters around campus, banners for the UC, ads in the Kaimin and local papers, Facebook[®] events and ads, reader board ads, radio spots and word of mouth. SILD alone advertises for more than 15 programs and/or events at any one time. A recent document, the Student Involvement Guide, has been published by the UC for student use. This guide lists all student groups, programs and annual events in one convenient location for students. These methods will most effectively convey to students the many ways in which they can be involved on the UM campus.

In order to continue group marketing efforts which simultaneously educate students about the importance of being involved on campus, SILD should develop a presentation of that discusses the importance of student involvement and how students can get involved in campus activities. This presentation should be delivered to staff and faculty at UM as an educational tool to encourage promotion of student involvement by professors. It will also be a precursor for making a similar presentation to students during classes, with permission from professors. The presentation to staff should enumerate the research that supports the benefits of student involvement, including students' likeliness to be more engaged in academic endeavors when engaged in the campus community as a whole. Part of this presentation would be a pitch to professors to give ten to fifteen minutes of class time to SILD presenters to talk to students about opportunities for getting involved; this method would achieve a captive student audience. Particular focus should be given to general education and typically freshmen classes in an effort to get students involved as early as possible in campus activities. The goal of this strategy is to make information more accessible and available to students in a single source.

A second suggestion for marketing would be to condense the ways events are advertised. For instance, several events or programs may go hand in hand with each other and they should be marketed as such. Posters, ads, radio spots, and so on could be jointly marketed. Condensing traditional marketing strategies would free up both budgets and time to allow for more creative marketing schemes, such as promotions with prizes or more visible marketing and person-to-person contact.

Students reported that, of the choices given, e-mail is the best way to contact them about upcoming events (72%). Other responses selected from the answers to question 27 suggest that the next most effective means of contacting students about upcoming events is through posters (40%), by phone (34%), and through banners in the UC (30%).

One of the issues concerning student contact via e-mail is that students' contact information is not available to campus programs unless the students volunteer such information. During presentations to classes and professors, a list should be circulated to students asking for contact information. This information would be used only to send information about upcoming events that students indicate they are interested in. For instance, when a student gives their contact information, they would check a box to indicate the programs about which they would like to be informed. This method would achieve marketing outreach while maintaining student privacy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the evidence presented in this assessment project and other more anecdotal information, the UC has decided to take a comprehensive look at the organization, mission, and desired outcomes of SILD. Action steps are currently underway to (re)establish the relevance of the UC's co-curricular programs, especially the Center for Leadership Development (CLD), with an anticipated completion date of December 31, 2009. Key UC staff members have met regularly since spring 2008 and are engaging in strategic planning sessions to "establish a new culture of how we do business through various systems by moving from an individual- to a team-based

approach.”¹² Recruitments for three program advisor vacancies with an anticipated start by fall semester allow the UC the opportunity to hire under this new approach in the hope that the successful candidates will assist in rebuilding and leading the team to function under the new model. The new model under discussion would also frame the efforts of SILD around student learning and development, which means learning and development outcomes would need to be established and assessed through further planning and dialogue.

Prepared by Elissa Looney, Honors Project 2008

¹² Molly Collins, SILD Assistant Director, Personal communication.