



Factors in Leadership Development for Communication Students in Co-Curricular Organizations

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Abstract:

Although leadership seems like something developed over the course of a career, flattening organizational structures means leadership skills matter from the start of one. This study investigated the role of co-curricular organizations in developing student leadership, finding that leadership develops in a curvilinear fashion, with leadership higher at the beginning and end of the student's education than it is in the middle. An investigation of participants in student media and a student advertising/public relations agency shows that the method of selecting students and the focus of the organizations may affect student perceived leadership development.

Introduction

From as early as elementary school age, developing leaders is a common slogan and part of many academic mission statements. Throughout middle school and high school, students are often told they will be tomorrow's problem solvers, decision makers, and leaders. However, for students majoring in mass communication at colleges and universities, leadership training is a less common element of the curriculum. It is not included in the undergraduate-level ACEJMC [accreditation standards](#) or in the UNESCO [Model Curricula for Journalism Education](#). However, it can be argued that the rapid changing and flattening of communication-systems and organizational hierarchy makes some leadership abilities useful, even for beginning communicators. There is a limited amount of research on the strategies that

communication programs use to teach leadership in the formal curriculum, so this study investigates the role of co-curricular activities in the formation of student leadership.

Co-curricular activities such as student media are designed to encourage student engagement beyond the classroom and are built "upon the belief that engagement yields a more robust and holistic academic experience, contributing to student satisfaction, retention, persistence, and experience" (Elias & Drea, 2013). For many co-curricular activities, the academic institution defines the expectations and requirements, while the students help define and contribute to the path of their own individualized experience within this framework. As such, many academic institutions offer college credits for student involvement in co-curricular organizations. Co-curricular activities

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are distinct from “extra-curricular activities,” which are “non-academic activities that are conducted under the auspices of the school but occur outside of normal classroom time and are not part of the curriculum” (Bartkus et al., 2012, p. 698).

Context

Universities that offer multiple majors in communication will often offer multiple co-curricular options for students. Typically, these are designed to supplement theory and practice with an experience in communicating to real audiences. Commonly, this will include student media, where students will conduct the editorial decision making, interviewing, editing, designing, producing, etc., to create co-curricular works such as student newspapers, yearbooks, or broadcasts. Those experiences offer a chance to practice, an opportunity to deal with the impact of their work on sources and audiences, and the experience of receiving feedback from a supervisor or leader. Some programs also have strategic communication agencies in which students work with real clients and audiences to produce advertisements, public relations campaigns, branding guidelines, and so forth.

The university where this study was conducted has a student body of approximately 6,800 students, and approximately 20 percent are enrolled in communications classes. Two different types of co-curricular organizations at this university were examined—a student agency and a student media organization. These two student-run, faculty-led organizations reside in the same communications program, and while students may volunteer to work at one of these co-curricular organizations, it is not a requirement for a degree. Since student involvement in these types of co-curricular activities can vary, researchers evaluated whether having a position of leadership in the co-curricular organization affected student perceptions of their leadership qualities.

Defining Leadership

Leadership is a complicated construct with multiple definitions; however, for this work, the notion of authentic leadership is used. Authentic leadership is defined by Walumbwa et al. (2008) as “a pattern of leader behavior that draws upon and promotes both positive psychological capacities and a positive ethical climate, to foster greater self-awareness, an internalized moral perspective, balanced processing of information, and relational transparency on the part

of leaders working with followers” (p. 94). This notion of leadership was used because of its developmental perspective. It focuses on general personal characteristics of leaders rather than particular skills that leaders would possess, which makes sense in a student context, as students are still acquiring those skills. Authentic leadership is an approach to leadership that emphasizes honest relationships, valuing input from others, and a foundation of ethical principles. In this study, authentic leadership was broken down into four components:

- **Self-awareness:** A process of reflection and re-examination by the leader of her or his strengths, weaknesses, and values.
- **Internalized moral perspective:** The ethical foundation adhered to by the leader as evidenced in her or his relationships, self-regulation and decisions.
- **Relational transparency:** A process of sharing one’s thoughts and beliefs with others. Such behavior promotes trust through disclosures that involve sharing information and expressions of one’s true thoughts and feelings.
- **Balanced processing:** The solicitation of opposing viewpoints and the equitable consideration of ideas. This is more commonly described as objectively weighing all the available information before making a decision.

Further, authentic leadership is discipline-agnostic, which matters because communication graduates will often find work in different industries. Using this framework, our analysis of student perceived leadership traits was based on the students’ self-identification with the four components of authentic leadership. Because the term leadership can be broadly defined and nuanced, establishing a baseline definition of leadership among participants, along with a validated tool for measuring these attributes and behaviours, was essential. However, there may be more to leadership than the definition we used for the purposes of this study (Ilies, Morgeson, & Nahrang, 2005; Shamir & Eilam, 2005).

Literature Review

The nature of leadership has evolved to meet the demands of a global environment and operate across boundaries. Leaders can operate from a distance without direct line-management control (Speechley, 2005), but some of the traditional elements of leadership have continued to be recognized (Elmuti, Minnis & Abebe 2005). For many years, employers

have sought leadership skills from communication students, and recent studies have emphasized the importance of preparing students for leadership roles essential for innovating and shaping media structures (Pavlik, 2013). Bronstein and Fitzpatrick (2015) cited the lack of opportunities for communication students to practice leadership in a university setting and outlined the need for students to learn “soft skills” such as collaboration, critical thinking, and communicating with diverse constituencies to be successful in their careers (p. 78) (Bush, Haygood & Vincent, 2016).

Recognizing the importance of leadership development is not new. A study by Harper (1982) found that about half of employers look for graduates to have leadership skills. While high-performing teams often buy into a shared agenda-type of philosophy, leaders are “generally responsible for overall organizational effectiveness as measured by production, efficiency quality, flexibility, satisfaction, competitiveness, and organizational development” (Gibson, Donnelly, Ivancevich & Konopaske, 2003). Moody, Stewart, and Bolt-Lee (2002) also found that leadership was a top-five preference for employers and a quality that graduates should be able to highlight in an interview. Ostrom-Blonigen et al. (2010) state that successful student leadership training programs can help bridge the gap between student and employee, suggesting that the employer preference is due to real value in the workplace. In many cases “value” doesn’t just refer to monetary value, as can be seen in a Gale and Bunton (2005) study that surveyed the alumni of two universities and found that respondents credited ethics training they received as students with affecting their professional actions. Similarly, a study by Shehata and Schwartz (2015) reported that leadership opportunities in a competition setting attracted the attention of employers who would ask open-ended questions about how the project leader helped solve a task through teamwork and project management strategies.

Communication students are often encouraged to seek applied experiences such as participating in co-curricular activities or completing internships. Even so, communication educators haven’t typically focused on leadership ability, preferring instead to stress the skills needed to succeed in a first job. As Bronstein and Fitzpatrick (2015) state, “Leadership training is lacking in all areas of mass communication education” (p. 77). King, reporting on the Carnegie-Knight Initiative of the Future of Journalism,

states that the students who are attracted to journalism programs in particular want training for their first job. These students are focusing on the immediate future after graduation, not looking toward skills needed later in their careers. However, it could be argued that leadership abilities in communication are a present need, not just a future one.

Bronstein and Fitzpatrick (2015) note that, “The dynamic character of the communication fields underscores the importance of establishing a pipeline populated by individuals who regard themselves not only as ‘job seekers’ mentioned in the Carnegie-Knight report but also as emerging leaders” (p. 77). The report suggested that students could gain exposure and familiarity with different approaches to leadership including transformational leadership, transactional leadership, democratic leadership, and so forth. Erizkova and Berger (2010) list important leadership skills including communication skills, ethical values and orientation, and problem-solving ability. Teaching leadership in university communication programs opens opportunities for all to become leaders through learning skills of influence (Olson, 2005). Leadership is an ability with implications beyond the career, as well. Leadership ability can be useful in effective citizenship. People play a variety of roles in life and may be strong leaders in some areas, while less so in others. Hallmark characteristics of a citizen leader include the desire to advance communities and a commitment to learning and critical thinking (Mason, 2007), selflessness, and personal integrity (Langone, 2004).

Leadership abilities are consequential while students are still in school. Dugan and Kommives (2007) discuss how leadership experiences in college accounted for 7%-14% of the overall variance in leadership outcomes for students they sampled (p. 14). Schullery and Gibson (2001) analyzed student descriptions of group work and found that students believe they are deficient in leadership skills needed to make groups work smoothly, and that student beliefs about leadership deficiency grew more negative over the semester.

One place where students might gain a more in-depth knowledge of leadership skills is in co-curricular activities such as student-run news organizations and student-run advertising/public relations agencies. These co-curricular organizations give students the advantage of first-hand experiences working on projects for real audiences or clients, but they go beyond class projects by also providing an opportunity for students to work within a model version of industry-specific

environments. Co-curricular organizations are often structured to give students leadership opportunities and responsibilities yet have them work under the guidance of an experienced faculty member or adviser. Sigmar et al. (2012) suggest that practicing social and emotional behavior through applied work leads to the development of emotional intelligence needed to help develop leadership skills.

The experience gained in student-run agencies can be categorized as experiential learning that focuses on the process of finding the best solution among many for solving complex, real-world problems (Hanne, 2005). Similarly, Quintanilla and Wahl (2005) asserted that service-learning projects allow students to “apply and learn course concepts by having them solve authentic, real-world problems with tangible outcomes” (p. 67). In strategic communication, experiential learning is particularly effective if students are exposed to client-facing experiences, as they are in student agency settings.

For example, Attansey, Okigbo, and Schmidt (2008) found that students who participated in client-based projects in three public relations classes showed a high propensity for “critical and analytical thinking, effective learning on one’s own, dissecting the basic elements of ideas, and working effectively with other individuals” (p. 36). Likewise, Cooke and Williams’ (2004) analysis of client-based projects showed that students benefitted from hands-on problem solving and collaboration, were exposed to diverse perspectives within an organization, and were better prepared for internships and careers. West and Simmons (2011) also found that students experience communication industry challenges more closely and gain career confidence when they present their ideas to real business people rather than simply repeating from memory principles studied in class (Bush, Haygood & Vincent, 2016).

Study Context

In the co-curricular activities researchers examined for this study, student leaders were hired through two distinct mechanisms that shared some commonalities. At the student agency, candidates were interviewed by the student leaders with little to no input from the faculty member, but the faculty director worked with the leadership team to interview and promote students to the three top-level leadership positions in the organization. An advisory board appointed the top-level position at the student media organization.

In both organizations, the appointed top-level students selected other students for leadership positions. This does not suggest that non-managerial positions do not have leadership opportunities, but rather recognizes that one of the *primary* duties of the top-level leadership positions was to hire, manage, and lead a team of students/peers.

Students sometimes set goals for themselves before they enter college. Therefore, as a component of this study, positions of leadership in both high school and college were examined. We also considered other student experiences that could affect leadership impressions and skills such as having completed an internship.

In addition to collecting information about high school and college leadership positions, information about students’ minor fields of study was also collected, as some academic disciplines provide instruction in leadership concepts. Research questions were as follows:

RQ 1: Is authentic leadership different for students in different types of communication co-curricular organizations?

RQ 2: Is authentic leadership different for students who think they are in a leadership position in a communication co-curricular organization?

RQ 3: Is authentic leadership different in students who have and have not done internships?

RQ 4: Does authentic leadership differ for students based on their minor field of study?

RQ 5: Do authentic leadership scores for students in co-curriculars differ based on other experiences?

Methods

Research participants were undergraduate communication students who were active in co-curricular organizations. Students participating in the on-campus agency and/or the student media (newspaper and television station) of a regional master’s-level university gave informed consent in accordance with IRB approval of the study and then completed survey instruments asking for information about their co-curricular involvement, their degree program, their internship experience, and their other high school and college involvement. A total of 49 undergraduate students completed the questionnaires. Additionally, respondents completed the [Authentic Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire](#) (AL-

SAQ). The ALSAQ includes assessments for overall authentic leadership and subscores for self-awareness, internalized moral perspective, balanced processing, and relational transparency. Validation studies for the instrument can be found in Walumba et al. (2008). Data were entered in SPSS for analysis.

For the ALSAQ measures, the instrument’s scoring instructions suggest that responses of 4 or 5 are high authentic leadership and scores of 3 or below indicate low authentic leadership. Full ALSAQ scores and the subscores were categorized into stronger and weaker groups for analysis. For each of the high school and college activities, variables were created for the number of activities in which students participated and the number of activities in which the respondents said they were leaders. Because of the relatively low number of responses, significance testing was not appropriate, so results are given in the form of descriptive statistics and cross-tabulations.

Results

On average, students rated their authentic leadership skills at about a 4 out of 5. The summary scores on the overall ALSAQ survey are found in Table 1, and subscales are found in Table 2. In Table 1, with a score of 80 representing the highest score a student could achieve, the mean of 64 represents an average item score of 4/5 and is the lower bound for “stronger leadership.”

Table 1. Frequencies on ALSAQ
Authentic Leadership Survey (Overview)

	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Perceptions of stronger leadership	19	37.5
Perceptions of weaker leadership	30	62.5

In Table 2, a 20 represents the highest score possible for each of the four subcategories; thus, a 16 represents an average item score of 4/5, which was the lower bound for a “stronger leadership” score. It is worth noting that “Balanced Processing” or questions that refer to the ability to include other opinions in decision making, had the lowest average score among the subscales.

With respect to Research Question 1 (“Is authentic leadership different for students in different types

Table 2. Authentic leadership survey subscores

Self-awareness		
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Perceptions of stronger leadership	35	70.8
Perceptions of weaker leadership	14	29.2
	=16.6	
Internalized Moral Perspective		
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Perceptions of stronger leadership	33	67.3
Perceptions of weaker leadership	16	32.7
	=16.6	
Balanced Processing		
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Perceptions of stronger leadership	15	30.6
Perceptions of weaker leadership	34	69.4
	=15.1	
Relational Transparency		
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Perceptions of stronger leadership	33	67.3
Perceptions of weaker leadership	16	32.7
	=16.5	

of communication co-curricular organizations?”), as seen in Table 3, a larger percentage of students in the student agency scored stronger with respect to leadership abilities than of the students in the student media organization.

Regarding Research Question 2 (“Is authentic leadership different for students who are in a leadership position in a communication co-curricular organization?”), data show that while the majority of students scored weaker in leadership, students

Table 3. Perceived Authentic Leadership by Co-Curricular Involvement

Type of Co-Curricular Organization	Student Agency	Student Media
Perceptions of stronger leadership	21 (72%)	13 (54%)
Perceptions of weaker leadership	8 (28%)	6 (46%)

who identified as holding organization leadership positions were more likely to perceive themselves as strong leaders, as can be seen in Table 4.

With respect to Research Question 3 (“Is authentic leadership different for students who have and have not done internships?”), as seen in Table 5, data suggest that there is not much of a difference between students with internship experience and those who do not have that prior experience. In fact, students who have done an internship score themselves slightly lower, which represents an interesting curvilinear relationship. Since the impact of an internship on leadership abilities is widely varied and often unmeasurable, these results aren’t surprising. While we can use the data to look at this question broadly, we would need to define the qualities and characteristics of successful internships in order to generate more specific insights.

For Research Question 4 (“Is authentic leadership different for students based on their minor field

Table 4. Perceived Positions of Leadership

Perceived Positions of Leadership	Students who perceive themselves as holding a leadership position	Students who don’t perceive themselves as holding a leadership position
Stronger leadership	11 (41%)	7 (33%)
Weaker leadership	16 (59%)	14 (67%)

Table 5. Perceived authentic leadership by whether a student has completed an internship

	No internship	At least one internship
Stronger leadership	6 (37%)	8 (31%)
Weaker leadership	10 (63%)	18 (69%)

of study?”), notably, a higher percentage of students with minors in humanities fields scored themselves higher in authentic leadership. Conversely, a substantial majority of business minors scored lower in authentic leadership, as seen in Table 6.

Research Question 5 asked, “Does perceived authentic leadership differ for students based on other leadership in school organizations?” For this, students were asked to list their organization experiences in

Table 6. Perceived authentic leadership by minor field of study

	Communications	Humanities	Social/Behavioral Science	Business	Science
Stronger leadership	0	7 (64%)	4 (36%)	4 (24%)	0
Weaker leadership	1 (100%)	4 (36%)	7 (64%)	13 (76%)	3 (100%)

Table 7. Perceived authentic leadership by number of school-based leadership experiences

	Number of leadership experiences in high school				
	0	1	2	3	4
Stronger leadership	2 (22%)	4 (31%)	5 (31%)	4 (62%)	1 (100%)
Weaker leadership	7 (78%)	9 (69%)	11 (69%)	3 (38%)	0
	Number of leadership experiences in college				
	0	1	2	3	4
Stronger leadership	7 (37%)	4 (27%)	5 (56%)	2 (66%)	0
Weaker leadership	12 (63%)	11 (73%)	4 (44%)	1 (33%)	1 (100%)

both high school and college, and responses are included in Table 7. As can be seen from the table, 3 or more high school leadership experiences were associated with a higher authentic leadership score in college, as were 2 or more leadership experiences in college.

Discussion

While students overall scored themselves as being strong in authentic leadership, their subscore for balanced processing was lower than the other three categories, indicating they feel they are still learning to seek out opposing viewpoints, suspend judgment, and consider all points of view before making decisions. One student leader stated, “None of us are experts, by weighing all viewpoints, not only do you introduce new perspectives and learn more, you also show that the opinions of others are valuable. Someone has to make a final decision, but I believe it is best practice to hear all of the ideas, so everyone feels encouraged to participate and bring their own special skills to the table.” Conversely, another student commented, “I believe that when there are ‘too many cooks’ in the kitchen there is often a dilemma in accomplishing a common goal. Asking for help and opinions are vital to development, but sometimes, a decision can be made without having multiple inputs.” These qualitative responses suggest that students are learning to balance effectively seeking out different points of view (consensus) with the needs of moving an initiative forward (logistics).

There were differences in the authentic leadership scores for students who participate in two different co-curricular organizations (RQ 1). Interestingly, those in the student agency perceived themselves as stronger leaders than those in the student media organization. Student agency membership is competitive, while the student media organization accepts any student who wishes to participate. Students accepted into the student agency may feel as if their hiring was a signal that they have leadership qualities already. A student holding a key leadership position in the agency commented, “I felt that being hired [in the student agency] as the Director meant that [the agency] saw something in me but knowing that the previous director and faculty advisors believed in me and trusted me to continue on their legacy, increased my confidence in my leadership abilities.” Conversely, a student in the student media organization described her leadership style as more adaptive and a “great evolutionary peri-

od for me. My philosophy changes often depending on feedback, outcomes and issues in the organization. Sometimes I have to sit back and trust that my voice is not needed during certain times.” These comments from students in key leadership positions in the student agency and media organization provide insights into why students in similar leadership positions rank their leadership skills differently.

The authentic leadership scores were different for students who identified as holding a leadership position (RQ 2). However, this difference may be partially attributed to the co-curricular agency structure. The student agency structure mirrors that of a professional agency, which is deliberately and notably hierarchical. Successful employees often move vertically during their student agency career and receive new titles as they seek positions with more autonomy. In an agency environment, it’s common for young employees to change jobs every 1 to 3 years, seeking better pay and prestigious job titles. By contrast, for a large percentage of journalists, their first position, or title, is the same as their long-term career goal. While they might hope to move into a larger market or a more prestigious brand, many journalists will spend their entire career as a “reporter” or “photojournalist.” Also, shifts in organizational structures have yielded opportunities where reporters, photojournalists, and freelance writers are no longer attached to a single organization. Students involved in student media may have different expectations for how leadership correlates with the titles they hold and the organizational structure of the student media organization.

With respect to the differences in authentic leadership scores between students who have and have not done internships, it was interesting that students’ authentic leadership scores were sometimes negatively related to their internship experience (RQ 3). If the purpose of an internship is to ground a student in the discipline and help contextualize academic knowledge, it seems that a student might leverage this “advanced knowledge” in a leadership role. The data suggest that internships either play a small role in students’ leadership, or that once students are exposed to actual leadership in the profession, they are then faced with reframing, or re-evaluating the strength of their own leadership abilities. The process of learning how to understand their own leadership development could explain the curvilinear relationship where students with no internship experience or multiple internship experiences rated themselves higher than

did students with one.

Authentic leadership appears to differ for students with minor fields of study (RQ 4). Reframing or re-evaluating one's leadership abilities might also explain how students with business minors perceived their authentic leadership qualities as being lower than students with humanities and social/behavioral science minor fields of study. One explanation may be that students taking business classes may have been formally introduced to many leadership strategies, case studies, models, and theories, and subsequently re-evaluate their own leadership with these experiences in mind. Students with a minor in humanities scored higher than students in all other minors combined. One explanation may be that the humanities often ask students to be empathetic to the needs of their audience and express/justify their personal beliefs. Many of these qualities can be viewed as leadership qualities and may have factored into students' perceptions of their leadership abilities.

Students' previous leadership experiences appear to play a small part in their perceptions of their leadership abilities, but once again students appear to reframe and re-evaluate their leadership experiences when they transition from high school to college (RQ 5). In high school the optimal number of leadership experiences appears to be two, while the number of leadership experiences in college is less important. Since high school students often compete for a limited number of acceptance spots at a college, the more leadership experiences a student holds, the more attractive the candidate is likely to be to a college. It appears that once students are admitted to college, they may re-evaluate these experiences with regard to how they perceive strength of their leadership abilities. In short, students may believe that more leadership experiences in high school aren't to make them stronger leaders, but better candidates to compete for limited opportunities and resources. One possibility is that high school students may focus more on the titles of leadership.

This study has heuristic value but has several limitations that urge caution in generalization. First, the number of student participants was sufficiently small as to preclude significance testing, leaving a possibility that distributions were due to chance. The multi-method data collection somewhat ameliorates this concern. Second, only two types of co-curricular experiences were studied. Other co-curriculars may vary based on other, unexplored variables. Thus, fu-

ture research should seek to compare professional and academic models for additional authentic leadership qualities and predictors.

Also, with respect to the problem of self-reporting in survey research, Northrup (1996) states, "the problems faced in obtaining accurate information in surveys are the same problems we face in everyday communication," and self-reported data are limited by the fact that they rarely can be independently verified. As such, care was taken to reduce student bias, selective memory, and exaggeration by distributing the survey to students who could easily opt out of the survey, making all student responses anonymous, and providing no grade, critique, or financial incentives to decrease motivation to fabricate. Nonetheless, we do acknowledge that recollection may be flawed and that human participants are not completely reliable. We tried to mitigate these threats by triangulating results on the surveys in two ways: by comparing results on the survey instrument with open-ended questions and by asking advisers and others who have worked with students who participate in organizations to comment on the findings for their own domain (agency adviser with agency data, for example) and across domains (agency adviser with student media data, for example) as a method of peer review for validity.

It's clear that student authentic leadership is shaped by many variables, but it appears that exposure to leadership through contact with the field, through classroom experiences in minors, and through co-curricular experiences may help students reframe and ground these perceptions.

Learning on the job is enhanced by the fact that any workplace generates a certain amount of pressure, and ambitious young people generate inner pressures of their own. Seeking recognition, fearing failure, working against deadlines, experiencing the urgencies of life in the real world, they learn lessons they do not soon forget (Gardner, 1990, p. 174).

Leadership development is a high priority for many organizations, and students with leadership abilities and experiences may be considered to have a competitive advantage. While no definitive models for leadership development have emerged, tools like the Authentic Leadership Self-Assessment Questionnaire may shed light on the criteria students use to evaluate their leadership potential. This may prove useful in understanding why some individuals develop and identify as leaders and provide researchers with a

framework to better design educational programs to foster leadership abilities in the future.

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