Experiential Student Leadership: Encouraging Self-Growth Through Leadership Experiences

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Each year, institutions of higher education take on the responsibility of mentoring and guiding newly appointed student leaders through a year of personal and academic growth. Many of the nation's most successful leadership programs find ways to conjoin both their educational and leadership experiences to help promote lasting change in both students and the institution of higher education (Eich, 2008). Encouraging student leaders to recognize the words of John F. Kennedy (1963) when he stated, "leadership and learning are indispensable to each other" can truly enrich the student leadership experience. In the spirit of President Kennedy's sentiment and past research findings, the following article outlines simple, but tangible suggestions from past student leaders to help future student leaders be more successful in conjoining their leadership experiences with academic growth. To help accomplish this goal, we provide personal insight from our leadership experiences to explain both individual and organizational challenges experienced in leadership roles at an institution of higher education. In explaining these challenges, we provide relatable and tangible solutions to help improve the successes of future student leaders.*

Individual Challenges and Solutions

In discussing our experiences as student leaders, there was a common thread we labeled 'individual challenges' that directly affected our leadership and academic growth. The following sections outline these common problems and the solutions we implemented to improve our experiences as student leaders. These solutions should be viewed as a possible outline for future leaders to implement throughout their tenure to enhance their experience and academic growth.

From Campaign Promises to a Unified Vision

After annual elections, newly appointed student leaders are left with the reality that they now need to translate their 'campaign promises' into tangible, measurable actions. This task is very similar to the experience of setting academic goals to map future career opportunities. Both these tasks can seem initially challenging and slightly overwhelming. However, by gaining the ability to create a strong, guiding vision, and following through on this vision with charisma and continued inspiration, these processes can become both a fun and exciting growth opportunity leading to lasting success.

In line with transformational leadership theory, an effective leader is expected to have the ability to create an idea that can motivate others while promoting positive change (Bass, 1999; Bass, 1996). This style of leadership also includes the ability to recognize what it will take for this idea to become a reality and how to encourage self and others to follow through on the vision. This leader uses perspective to see the steps that must be taken on the way to achieving a particular goal, using the available resources and doing so in a timely manner. In our experience, the most valuable components of transformational leadership are understanding what you want to achieve and how to react if things do not work the way you imagined, all while continuing to motivate those around you to achieve their own goals (Bass, 1996).

By creating a unified vision, we were able to lay the foundation that helped us carry out our initial promises and transform them into a tangible reality. For instance, one long-standing policy we had the initiative to change was our school's finals week policy. This large task was initially very overwhelming, but by creating a unified and detailed

vision of the end goal we determined what specifically needed to be changed, who we needed in the university system to support the changes, and how to adapt as the policy advanced throughout university committees. Our unified vision, charisma, and inspiration helped us set specific goals and tangible objectives. This then helped us develop a time-line for achieving each item. From there, we were better prepared to manage our experience throughout the year as academic, personal, and leadership responsibilities all competed for our time.

Managing Your Time to Complete Your Goals

A common experience often felt by student leaders is the lack of time to accomplish all of their 'required tasks'. Because of this, it is crucial for student leaders to develop effective time management skills. An average day can include school work, internship opportunities, jobs, other involvement throughout campus, and having an enjoyable social life. It is important for student leaders to view these opportunities as complementary and a chance for self-growth rather than a nuisance. With this mentality, these unique challenges can be an opportunity to apply a new skill set of time management.

In our experiences, we all used different ways of managing our time in day-to-day responsibilities. From using planners and calendars, to simple to-do lists and phone reminders throughout the day we each accomplished our own unique goals. This was largely made possible because instead of viewing our unique ways of managing time as negative, we recognized the diversity and inherent strengths of our alternative methods in helping us accomplish our daily tasks and unified vision. Because of this, we recommend instead of focusing on what works for others, it is more useful to focus on the unique methods that best work for yourself. Too often, we try to force ourselves into a pre-established box and expect ourselves to operate in a prescribed manner. If we focus on what is already going well for us with our time-management, we may find ways to bolster our own unique abilities.

Believing in Yourself

Accomplishing a specific policy initiative or organizing and running a student event as a student leader require that we truly believe in ourselves. Many student leaders do not realize how much they will personally

grow, and even though it might go unnoticed, this transition can be challenging. Recognizing this, it is important to make the most out of any leadership position, and to do so, students must realize they themselves will grow and change. While this belief is continually refined throughout the leadership experience, we found several components that helped make the growth go more smoothly.

In discussing our common experiences, we recognized the traits we learned in our leadership positions were skills we already used in the classroom, and that those experiences actually complemented each other. This realization helped motivate each of us to lean into the fear of failing because we recognized we had already been successful. For instance, many characteristics that professors desire for their students can be found in those who refine their leadership skills. Some of these traits include a strong work ethic, organization, communication skills, and the ability to work with others. In completing projects as student leaders, we were required to work as a cohesive group, sticking to and accomplishing a common goal, using analytical and critical thinking skills, working as team members in group projects, and maintaining and sticking to time frames. As each of us developed the specific skills in our leadership role, we found ourselves doing better in our academic lives.

We believe that for individuals to excel in a leadership position, they must be comfortable with who they are as individuals. Student leaders will face self-doubt at many different times throughout their leadership experience and academic careers. This insecurity is often compounded when student leaders focus on the preconceived notion that only a particular type of student finds themselves in a leadership role. We believe, however, there is not one common mold for a leader. Leaders come from many different backgrounds, races, and genders and this diversity in experience complements the ability of each leader to promote positive change in a university system.

Individual Solutions: Quick Takeaways
- Have goals set in place and make sure they lead you to a unified vision.
- Realize that to achieve these goals, methods and approaches might need to change.

- Find what works for you and create a routine to help with time-management. Not everyone is the same and what might work well for some may not necessarily work well for you.
- It is absolutely okay to make mistakes. Acknowledge the problem, be transparent with your team about what is going on, and come up with a solution to fix it as quickly as possible. This is crucial for your self-growth and your team's success!
- Bring your own style to leadership. You are there for a reason, acknowledge that and do not be too hard on yourself. You have what it takes, so believe in yourself.

Organizational Challenges and Solutions

As each of us identified solutions to our challenges, we recognized that many of our challenges were created by the organizational structure of a university. To address these challenges, we were required to develop an extensive knowledge of the university system and the people working in this system. The sections below explain the common themes of challenges we encountered and the solutions implemented to help us be more successful.

Understanding the System

As leaders, it was important for us to recognize that any of our initiatives would need the support of several administrators to be successfully implemented. A perfect knowledge of the entire university's system was not required, but an understanding of how major components interact—and who to talk to get something done—was vital. From our experiences working on the finals week policy, we pursued the initiative with excitement and vigor guided by our unified vision. However, we quickly realized the university was a complex system of administrators, faculty, and staff and any change would require their support and guidance, and our vision to expand. More specifically, we recognized we needed to work with both faculty who enforce the policies in the various academic departments and the administrators who created these policies including the academic provost. As student leaders, our task was to work with these administrators to convince them that our initiative was a positive solution to a real-life problem. Once we realized this, each

of us adapted our leadership style to be less 'task-focused' and instead focused more on cultivating meaningful relationships.

Relationship-Focused Approach

A student leader's tenure is very limited. Within a short time, you will graduate and move on, so creating lasting impact on-campus under that time crunch is challenging. Because of this, we believe it is more important for student leaders to focus on building relationships with administrators to progress towards common goals. Even if a goal is not completed during one student leader's tenure, the relationships forged with administrators are an asset to future student leaders. When student leader after student leader demonstrate consistency in ideas and a level of respect for the policy process, a level of trust is developed that carries on into the future. Students may leave, but the culture of collaboration with the goal of improvement will stay. For example, in one academic college at our university, previous student leaders had built up a level of credibility with administrators that we were able to benefit from in accomplishing specific initiatives. Because past leaders had blazed the trail, we were able to address serious issues and were taken seriously, even when those issues were sensitive and possibly viewed as a strict faculty problem. This relationship emphasis becomes increasingly important as we continue to work with the administration in our university system.

Students to Administration

In our experiences, we found that representing a student constituency to high-level administrators can be challenging. Sometimes, what a student leader wants and what administrators want are very different. So, how does one bridge these gaps? Firstly, trust needs to be established between student leaders and the administrators. Administrators need to see proof that student leaders are valuable and can be trusted to accurately represent student interests. Student leaders should understand the needs and priorities of administration and know how to find common ground between the two parties. It is a delicate balance. Student leaders need to work with administration, but must remember they represent student interests, not the interests of administration. Sometimes the interests of both coincide and some of the times a student initiative does not align with the current priorities of a particular administrator or the university

as a whole. Finding common ground satisfying both parties is typically the most successful option and can be accomplished if there is an emphasis on relationships rather than on tasks.

Secondly, student leaders need to take the initiative and find creative solutions to get administrator support. Administrators do not have the time to be as engaged with students as a student leader is, thus an issue a student leader brings up could be new information. By student leaders already having a possible solution, an administrator saves time and sees the value in working with students. This can largely be accomplished by working through many of the individual challenges outlined in the previous section. More specifically, having a unified vision allows student issues and solutions to gather support from others more quickly, increasing the likelihood that administrators will respond.

Lastly, student leaders need to effectively communicate and convince administration to see why a certain idea is beneficial to students and by extension, the university as a whole. Because proposed changes can affect thousands of individuals, it is crucial for you to create compelling solutions with measurable outcomes that inspire administrators to invest their energy into implementing the change. By having a detailed and unified vision, with tangible outcomes for students, administrators are more likely to rally behind the efforts of students and work together collaboratively with them to accomplish the specific goal. While these techniques can help you prepare for foreseen problems, it is equally important to be prepared for the unexpected shifts that will inevitably happen.

Adapting to Inevitable Shifts

Each institution of higher education is continually adapting to the unique needs of their students, staff, faculty, and administration. Because of this, it is important for students to be flexible in their unique goals and vision. In our experience working on the finals week policy, we had to continually adapt to the ever-changing needs of our students and faculty. For example, we initially miscalculated which faculty subcommittee we needed to present our policy to before we could implement it as a formal rule at our school. This miscalculation could have been devastating for our policy initiative had we not been willing to adapt, change our desired

goal slightly, and focus on working with administrators to fix the actual problem. For instance, after nearly a year of working with faculty members on this policy, we were not able to formalize it as a university policy. We did, however, present the desired policy to higher administration who then required faculty sub-committees to perform formal reviews of our proposed policy and take action during the next academic year. Frustrations like this happen to anyone who wants to create change in a university, but it is vital to react well and understand that sometimes roadblocks happen. Because we did not give up and instead adapted to the roadblocks, we were able to work collaboratively with faculty, which will likely end in changed policy.

Organizational Solutions: Quick Takeaways

- Focus on building meaningful relationships with administrators! Discuss your ideas and provide realistic solutions to problems. Administrators will be impressed that students want to help make the university a better place!
- Do most of the legwork. You want to walk into a meeting with a plan ready to execute so all you need is their approval to make it happen.
- Be willing to adapt! Your original plan, no matter how well-thought out, will need to change. View this experience as an opportunity to learn more rather than an attack on you as a person.
- A university is very slow to change—begin working on your goals sooner rather than later and consistently evaluate your progress. Don't be scared to pass off your work on to future student leaders.

Conclusion

Being a student leader is a transformative process that can lead to meaningful individual growth while also facilitating organizational change. As is common with most growth experiences, there are certain barriers that will require you to directly address and then adapt to in order to be successful. By being aware of individual and organizational challenges, student leaders can possibly improve their experiences as student leaders. Accordingly, this paper sought to identify common individual and organizational problems often appearing in an institution

of higher education, while also providing tangible, actionable solutions. While the experience of student leaders will differ from institution to institution, many of the challenges and solutions outlined in this paper could be useful for future student leaders in the higher education system.

*The experiences described in this paper are the cumulative experiences of three student leaders at Utah State University in the 2016-17 academic year. These student leaders worked collaboratively throughout the year on a finals week policy that directly affected their academic experience. The challenges and possible solutions provided are the commonalities of each student leaders' experiences and are not empirically based nor empirically evaluated. That being said, each of the student leaders have found these suggestions useful in their leadership and academic experiences.

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