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Program Assessment: The Leadership Program in the School of Public  
Affairs: Training College Students for Ethical, Community-Oriented  
Leadership

Extended Abstract

The Leadership Program in the School of Public Affairs at American University is a four-year, 15-credit course of study with approximately 120 students, which leads to a certificate in Advanced Leadership Studies. Its mission is *to provide a venue for leadership development through simulations, readings, discussions, seminars, team activities, hands-on social activism, and internships -- training students to think creatively, act honestly, and make constructive community-oriented decisions*. Students are encouraged to hone skills and establish habits that will help them maximize their potential as leaders when they enter the professional world. The curriculum and program activities are designed to enhance the students' leadership education through experience and reflection. In spring 2005 and 2006, Leadership students worked with the Program Director to develop a survey and collect quantitative and qualitative information on the students' backgrounds and experiences in the program. This paper describes the type of students who participate in the Leadership Program, their on-campus leadership positions, and their perceptions about experiences and skills acquired.

The long-term goal of the Leadership Program is to produce graduates who are positive social change agents, have “good” jobs, go on to further education (if desired), serve as good role models in the community and at home, have extensive social networks, and are active AU and Leadership Program alumni. Surveys to measure the extent to which these long-term outcomes have been met have not been done yet, thus the focus of this paper will be on short-term, more easily measured outcomes, which include measures of student satisfaction, student leadership positions, community service activities, scholarships and awards, and the percentage of students completing certificate requirements.

### **Methods and Results**

Class-specific surveys were developed by the professor and students and were administered to the freshman, sophomore and senior classes. To determine the profile of the type of student who joins the Leadership Program several questions were asked about high school performance. The average self-reported GPA of the 67 members that responded to this question was 3.7 on a 4.0 scale.

Students reported taking an average of 4 AP/IB courses during their high school careers. The Leadership Program clearly attracts ambitious, intelligent young adults.

Students were asked what was most meaningful to them about the Leadership Program and how they felt they had benefited from the program. Responses tended to focus on a few areas: helping secure a job or internship, improvements in public speaking skills, and networking within the Washington, D.C. community. Networking was by far the most frequent response especially with the Class of

2008 which was the first class surveyed that participated in a mentor program that pairs students with professionals in the community.

Equally important, students responded that working closely with their classmates and getting to know them was a positive experience. Though there currently is not enough data to draw a conclusion, it supports the idea of doing more research on the benefits of having class cohorts that meet together over the entire four years of college. The 67 Leadership Program students surveyed in spring 2006 reported membership in over 150 clubs and organizations. This small group of students (N=84) out of an undergraduate population of 5,800 students at AU, made up slightly less than one half of the Student Senate and one third of Student Government overall.

This paper also examines the results of the organization development technique known as "Appreciative Inquiry," in which a convenience sample of Leadership students from all four classes participated in spring 2006. The Appreciative Inquiry method asks participants to describe peak experiences they have had in the program and shared ideal visions for their roles in its future. The final component of the Appreciative Inquiry process is "provocative proposals" where students used their discussion of the best to make proposals for the future. Students expressed keen interest in more group activities where they had the opportunity to work with their peers on service projects. They understood and appreciated leadership dynamics best when putting theory into practice and reflecting on its meaning as individuals as well as a group of trusted peers.

While further research is needed to track graduates and determine the long term impact of leadership development training for political science majors, preliminary indications point to heightened self-confidence and ability to create social networks as educational outcomes that produce successful graduates and civically engaged citizens.