

Impact of a Summer Leadership Academy on High School Student Leader Development

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A private university developed a week-long High School Leadership Academy for rising Sophomores. Over a period of two years, students were assessed both on their satisfaction with the program and their self-reported leader development as measured by the Student Leadership Practices Inventory®. Students displayed significant leadership growth across all practice areas, with especially significant improvement in the areas Model the Way and Inspire a Shared Vision. This paper describes the program in detail from formation to execution, presents data from student assessments, and gives recommendations for institutions looking to develop a similar program in the future.

Keywords: leadership development, higher education, Student Leadership Challenge, S-LPI, social change, community partnership, high school leadership

INTRODUCTION

In the early months of 2017, a university was awarded a grant to develop a summer leadership institute for high school freshmen. From the vision of this donor, as well as from the input and expertise of a number of faculty, staff, and consultants, the High School Leadership Academy (HSLA) was born. The program intentionally targeted students from over 30 public, private, and charter schools in the region. In addition, two students from Spain were also able to join the program. For seven days, 64 high school students were in residence on a university campus, fully immersed in a culture of leadership and learning. Students were placed in facilitated groups with others from various communities often quite different from their own. The first Academy was launched in Summer 2017, with the hope and expectation that it would develop into an annual program.

The program's curriculum was developed from two main sources: Kouzes and Posner's (2014) *Student Leadership Challenge* and the *Social Change Model of Leadership* (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996). Students were led through a series of workshops, breakout sessions, fun activities, and service opportunities that centered on each student's ability to grow as influencers. Following the social change model (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996; Komives, Wagner, & Associates, 2017), the curriculum led students through a progression of leadership thought, from self-understanding to community influence. Students were pre-sorted into groups of 6-7 students from various schools, with great effort made to build groups that were geographically and demographically diverse. The students remained in these groups for the duration of the HSLA, up to and including the presentation of their final project.

From the start of the week, students understood that the ultimate goal of the High School Leadership Academy was not only to grow individually, but to identify a common issue and design a plan for leading

change across the schools represented in their group. Every session and activity within the Academy was geared toward these goals, using the social change model and Student Leadership Challenge as catalysts. Each day of the Academy began with a facilitated group session, during which the lead facilitator introduced the overall topic for the day. Students learned about themselves and one another through breakout activities and games. A day trip was taken to an area challenge course to do team-building and growth. In addition, speakers were brought in throughout the Academy to cover relevant issues like body image, diversity, social-justice, bullying, and mindfulness. Students engaged in activities that required self-reflection, teamwork, and vision-casting. Over the week-long program, students were presented with opportunities to explore their own understandings of leadership, participate in brainstorming and activities, develop a sense of teamwork, interact with engaging speakers, and, as a culminating experience, come up with a plan to overcome a critical challenge in their own communities and schools.

This paper will focus on the rationale for and process of developing the High School Leadership Academy, highlight its curricular elements, and provide data collected from students over two years of the HSLA. Based on this data, strengths and limitations will be discussed, as well as areas for potential change and growth. Lastly, the author will present his own ideas about the effectiveness of such a program and some suggestions for building a similar experience that will benefit both the attendees and the college/university.

REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP

The importance of early leadership education has been repeatedly demonstrated in the literature. Fuller, Harrison, Buckstein, Martin, Lawrence, and Parks (2017) noted the important impact of high school leadership training on future development. Likewise, Komives and Johnson (2009) and Bowman (2014) recognized that high school leadership experiences are a predictor of positive collegiate leadership outcomes. In most instances, these leadership experiences occur within the high school setting. While high school leaders often recognize the need for increased leadership development for students, the already over-packed, standardized curriculum leaves little room for formalized leadership training (Chan, 2000). Sports teams and clubs often provide leadership development at some level, yet such initiatives often fall short of meeting adolescents' developmental needs and wants (Starratt, 2007). In addition, while there are a number of summer leadership camps and student academies run by organizations such as the Boy Scouts of America (scouting.org) and the National Student Leadership Conference (nslcleaders.org), a model such as this one, which brings high school leadership development to the college or university campus, is somewhat unique.

Unfortunately, there remains a lack of research on the integration of adolescent leadership development on a sense of increased responsibility to one's school and community (Whitehead, 2009). The majority of school-based leadership development opportunities are embedded within clubs, extracurricular activities and athletics. These opportunities, while beneficial, fail to connect students to the bigger picture of influence and responsibility. Until students feel a sense of responsibility for specific leadership initiatives within the larger school community, they fail to fully engage and take on a sense of true ownership (Mitra, 2005).

Whitehead (2009) underscored the importance of utilizing authentic leadership as a framework for leadership development with adolescents. The core categories of authentic leadership, namely: (1) personal authenticity; (2) ideal authenticity, which involves having a vision for the good beyond oneself; and (3) social authenticity, which connects to a person's interactions with his or her environment, (Woods, 2007) align well with the social change model as described earlier in this text. Students are seeking for ways to better themselves while making some impact on the world around them. Altruism has become a consistent calling card for the younger generations in America (Shek, Ma, & Liu, 2015). At the core of both authentic leadership and the social change model is a connection to one's community, or service leadership. (Avolio and Locke, 2004; Komives, Wagner, & Associates, 2017; Shek, Ma, & Liu, 2015). Service leadership became a central component of the design of the High School Leadership Academy curriculum.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

The Academy's team was composed of faculty and university staff with expertise ranging from student life, counseling and enrollment management. Most importantly, the program recruited college students to serve as junior facilitators and mentors. This experience provided the college students the opportunity to apply the skills they had acquired through classes in leadership development as well as accrue points towards completing their leadership certificate offered through the university's student affairs program.

The program staff solicited nominations for student participation from the university's network of partner high schools in the Delaware Valley region. A formal application process required an essay that focused on the applicant's perception of leadership as well as a demonstration of civic engagement in school and the community supported with letters of recommendation.

The High School Leadership Academy took place for 7 days in the early-part of the summer. The leadership team felt that an early-summer date would still allow families time to vacation and students to engage in other camps and work opportunities. The first Academy started with a Monday afternoon check-in, but feedback from working parents encouraged the team to adjust the start to a Sunday the following year. On this first afternoon and evening, students were assigned dorms and roommates, shared dinner in the cafeteria, and participated in a series of icebreaker activities culminating in a campus-wide scavenger hunt designed to make connections and help students get the lay of the land.

TABLE 1
PRE-POST TEST RESULTS

<i>Items</i>	<i>Pre-test mean (n=57)</i>	<i>Post-test mean (n=52)</i>	<i>p-value</i>
<i>I am a leader.*</i>	3.842105	4.509615	*3.4364E-06
<i>I have learned practical leadership skills.*</i>	3.589286	4.384615	*3.47E-07
<i>I don't know how to inspire others.</i>	2.333333	2	0.062475
<i>I can effectively influence a group of my peers.*</i>	3.596491	4.04902	*0.007741
<i>I have a clear vision to make positive changes in my school/community.</i>	4.087719	4.288462	0.187413
<i>I am equipped to make positive changes in my school/community.*</i>	3.824561	4.307692	*0.00187
<i>I am confident that I will have a positive impact on my school/community.</i>	4.035088	4.115385	0.596213
<i>I do not feel confident in my ability to lead.</i>	2.157895	1.807692	0.051174
<i>I know how to access the resources I need to bring change.*</i>	3.464286	4	*0.000528
<i>I am excited to lead change in my school/community.</i>	4.22807	4.211538	0.912172
<i>Note: * = statistically significant</i>			

DISCUSSION OF OUTCOMES

To assess the impact of the Academy, the assessment team developed a 10-item Likert scale pre- and post-test instrument to measure students' self-reported growth from before and at the end of the week. Self-reports have long been an important aspect of the adolescent leader development literature (Day, 2011; Liu, Z., Riggio, R. E., Day, D. V., Zheng, C., Dai, S., & Bian, Y., 2019). While self-reports can be marred by adolescents' desire for social acceptance and other bias, they create a solid framework from which to measure growth. Fifty-seven students filled out the ten-item questionnaire prior to the first session. Fifty-two students handed in a post-test, which resulted in a 91.2% response rate across both instruments.

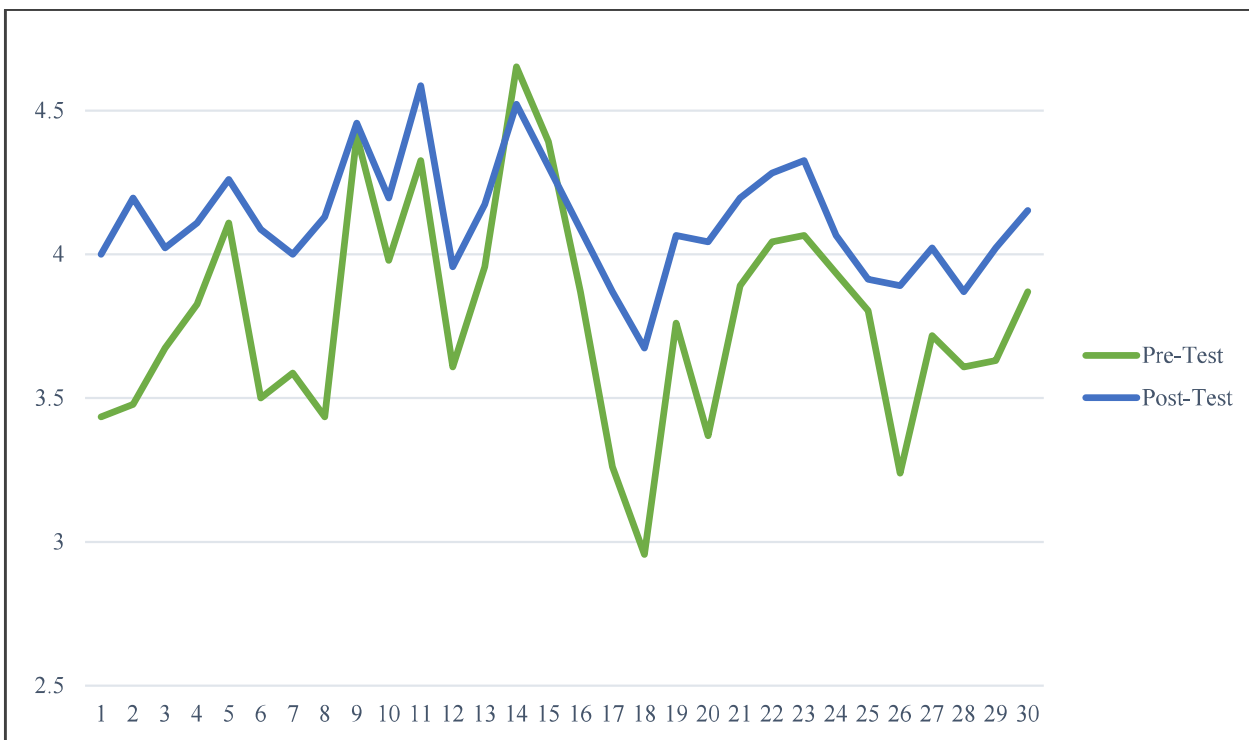
As shown in Table 1, significantly significant results were found for items 1, 2, 4, 6, and 9. The most extreme improvement was shown in responses to question 2, “I have learned practical leadership skills.” Students expressed significant improvement in the areas of personal leadership growth (“I am a leader”; “I have learned practical leadership skills”), group influence and leadership (“I can effectively influence a group of my peers”), and awareness of their ability to impact their community (“I am equipped to make positive changes in my school/community”).

TABLE 2
STATISTICALLY SIGNIFICANT ITEMS AND CORRESPONDING PRACTICE AREAS

S-LPI practice areas	<i>Model the way</i>	<i>Inspire a shared vision</i>	<i>Challenge the process</i>	<i>Enable others to act</i>	<i>Encourage the heart</i>
Significantly improved items	Items 1, 6, 21, 26	Items 2, 7, 12, 17	Items 8, 18	Items 19, 29	Item 20

In the debrief from the first summer program, the university staff and consulting team recognized the need for a strongly normed and more reliable assessment. The group wanted to better measure the effectiveness of the curriculum, as well as allow for the possibility to track the Academy’s longitudinal impact. While the pre-post survey provided encouraging results, a more robust instrument could present a stronger case. The Student Leadership Practices Inventory® (Student LPI®) was the clear choice to use with a curriculum that was based upon the *Student Leadership Challenge* curriculum (Kouzes & Posner, 2014).

FIGURE 1
STUDENT LPI PRE-POST TEST DIFFERENCES



The sample for the Student LPI® consisted of 42 high school rising sophomores. 26 of the students identified as female (62%), with 15 students identifying as male and one student as other. The pre-test S-LPI was given at the start of the Academy, prior to any workshops or activities. The post-test was taken on the last day of curricular activities, before students gave their final presentations to one another and their parents/guardians. As evidenced by Figure 1, the means of students' post test scores were consistently higher than on the pre-test. Using a paired t-Test, results showed statistically significant ($p < .05$) increases on items 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 12, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 26, and 29, nearly 50% of the overall items on the S-LPI assessment.

Based on the instrument's scoring key (Kouzes & Posner, 2013), these significant increases spanned all five practice areas covered by the Student Leadership Challenge®, with the practice areas of *Model the way* and *Inspire a Shared Vision* showing the most frequent significant increases, with four out of the 6 questions in each of these two areas evidencing significant differences. The score improvements across the range of S-LPI practice areas echoes the findings of other studies utilizing the S-LPI (Marcketti, Arendt, & Shelley, 2011). The marked increases in the *Model the Way* and *Inspire a Shared Vision* constructs align with the results found in a longitudinal study by and Waite, Mensinger, Wojciechowicz, Colistra, and Gambescia (2019), who also saw a significant increase in the *Challenge the Process* area.

REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As displayed throughout this paper, student responses to the High School Leadership Academy were overwhelmingly positive. Student surveys included such statements as, "I really learned a lot" and "The presenters were helpful and creative." Likewise, parents of participants shared a sense of gratefulness for the learning that occurred during the weeklong program. In addition, both the pre-post survey instrument and the Student LPI© showed significantly positive results in students' awareness of and sense of responsibility for leadership.

The findings of this study are limited by their short-term nature. Had the university continued to host and run the HSLA program, staff had discussed the importance of tracking students' follow-through on their planned change initiatives across their high schools. Longitudinal studies, such as the recent work by Waite et. al. (2019), do show evidence of consistency. Relatedly, while students showed improvement in their self-reported leadership scores, this merely reflects other studies using the Student Leadership Challenge curriculum (Marcketti, Arendt, & Shelley, 2011).

Although there was much discussion about the need to provide ongoing support and observation of HSLA participants throughout the school year, limited staffing and resources presented major challenges to such a possibility. Additionally, because the Academy model placed a strong value on engaging students from numerous high schools across a broad region, tracking even one group would involve much travel and coordination. Students would be working on projects concurrently without the immediate support of their co-collaborators.

The HSLA was indeed a positive experience for the student participants as well as the staff involved with the program. Still, like most summer programs, it was extremely resource-intensive. Universities need to balance the demand on resources with the level of impact for the school and community. While the literature supports adolescent leadership learning, deep learning and application cannot occur in a vacuum. For leadership learning to be most effective, it requires regular feedback, curriculum, discussion, and assessment, incorporating formal and informal activities (Andenoro, Allen, Haber-Curran, Jenkins, Sowcik, Dugan, & Osteen, 2013). The High School Leadership Academy lays the foundation for a more complete model that combines university expertise with regular conversation, follow-up, and accountability throughout the high school year. With the need for leadership at the collegiate level and beyond, the difficulties of coordination and shared responsibility of such a model would be well-worth the work. A similar program that is focused on high school juniors or seniors can create some strong foundations that can be developed at the collegiate level. In addition, there can be strong institutional benefits related to recruitment.

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