Undergraduate Student Perceptions of Affiliate Organization Contributions to What They Learn about Leadership While Serving as Officers in Professionally Oriented Clubs

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Abstract

Undergraduate students with job or career goals often seek membership in professionally oriented extracurricular clubs. Organizations that sponsor these groups claim to offer advantages to students who participate, yet the role they play in providing exposure to professional learning experiences and preparing undergraduates for working life has received scant attention.

What remains unexplored are professional organization efforts to guide the professional and leadership development of undergraduate students who assume positions as officers in university-affiliated chapters. The investigation of such efforts might consider the role of contextual factors given their importance in shaping student experiences in learning about the profession and leadership (Rubin, Bommer, & Baldwin, 2002), and more specifically whether a student group is affiliated with an organization outside the university or remains independent. This affiliate relationship may provide access to skills, information, resources, and a practical orientation typically unavailable on university campuses (Peltier, Scovoti, & Pointer, 2008).

This poster presentation will present a current study exploring undergraduate student perceptions of the contributions of an affiliate relationship to their experiences as leaders in a professionally oriented club. It focuses on student leaders of a Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) chapter at a public state university in Northern California and its Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) affiliate.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Komives, Lucas, & McMahon’s (2006) relational model of leadership, which describes leadership as a relational and ethical process through which individuals work together to accomplish change or make a difference for the common good.

Research Questions

1. What do the Public Relations Student Society of America (PRSSA) and its parent organization, the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), provide leaders of student chapters in terms of leadership resources, training, and support?

2. What are undergraduate public relations students’ perceptions of what they learn about leadership by participating as officers in PRSSA?
Research Design

A case study framework employing qualitative research techniques has been used to complete this study. Observations of six PRSSA events (membership/executive board, other meetings) and one university-sponsored leadership event; interviews with seven PRSSA officers, four PRSSA faculty and professional advisors, one national PRSSA staff person; and a review of documents produced by PRSSA, PRSA locally and nationally were sources of data.

Major Findings

Research Question One

- The PRSSA national organization offers a range of resources, in terms of events, materials, and access to other student leaders, to help chapters and specifically their individual officers to fulfill their responsibilities and learn about leadership.

- While PRSSA strives to involve chapter presidents and/or other officers in its activities and make them aware of offerings, attendance and/or use are optional. Chapter officers (particularly the chapter president) must take the initiative.

- The PRSSA national organization viewed leadership as necessarily supportive of public relations as a profession, the organization itself, and its affiliate PRSA as well. This advocacy, in addition to diversity, ethics, mentoring of future professionals, and lifelong learning are key components of the leadership concept shared by the two organizations and incorporated into national chapter officer training.

- The two PRSSA chapter professional advisers primarily provided advice and counsel through formal, scheduled phone meetings with the chapter president, and in one case offered career-related advice to members by e-mail and social media.

- PRSSA professional advisers highlighted different aspects of leadership as defined by the national affiliate organization, with one focusing on service to organization, profession, and peers, and the other highlighting skills such as negotiation and facilitating difficult situations involving diverse populations.

- The PRSSA chapter faculty adviser offered advice and counsel on an as needed basis, particularly when the chapter president encountered personnel issues on the executive board or had logistical questions. In this sense, his purpose seemed similar to that filled by the two chapter professional advisers.

- The current PRSSA chapter faculty adviser considered leadership to have an ethical component, which echoes his research interests and one focus of the national organization. He also highlighted the importance of public relations leaders for serving the profession itself, a point made by one of the professional advisors and the national organization as well.

- Both faculty advisers distinguished leaders from followers in public relations, and emphasized attention to the organization or profession, reputation, and officer motivation as key in terms of chapter leadership attributes.
Faculty advisers, professional advisers, and the PRSSA national office focused their efforts on chapter presidents as opposed to students filling other officer positions.

Service to the profession, advocacy for PRSSA, and group dynamics/team building among chapter executive board members, emerged as common officer leadership competencies among individuals interviewed.

**Research Question Two**

PRSSA chapter officers considered their primary responsibility as leaders to help members maximize the benefits of membership and gain entry into the public relations profession. This dual information providing and advisory role incorporated sharing insight on public relations classes and instructors; details on internships; contacts; advice on interviewing and related matters; and observations on what public relations professionals do.

Chapter officers met the aforementioned leadership objective by planning programs for members; conversing with each other and members at meetings or via other means; sharing details on related activities they believe will interest members, and why; and encouraging members to attend these activities.

The majority of PRSSA officers had prior leadership experience, which in turn led them to seek their current position. Two of the most active and visible officers, however, reluctantly assumed officer roles yet nonetheless found in the chapter’s goal to educate and engage members in learning about the public relations profession a source of inspiration and motivation for their efforts.

PRSSA leaders most commonly identified the development of skills in the communications arena while they served as officers, which supported their efforts to fulfill their larger leadership purpose.

PRSSA chapter officers derived considerable value from attending events designed primarily to help them gain knowledge and insight into the public relations profession, such as the National Conference and Agency Day.

PRSSA chapter officers learned about their roles and leadership largely from each other, mirroring the national organization’s facilitation of peer-to-peer exchanges among officers. Two officers acknowledged the advisory role played by the chapter’s faculty adviser as vital to a corresponding “learn by doing” approach.

Three active PRSSA chapter officers seemed most conscious of the importance attached to working effectively in teams as part of their leadership experience while serving on the executive board.

With one exception, PRSSA chapter officers were largely unable to identify leadership as a subject labeled as such in classes they completed at their university. One officer cited leadership as a topic addressed at the Student Organization Leadership Conference, and two officers who attended that event also commented favorably on group process/teambuilding presentations given.
Significance of Findings

- PRSSA student officers acquired skills and aptitudes that fueled the leadership development they experienced while filling specific officer roles.

- PRSSA chapter leaders have gained insight into a conception of leadership in the field apparently designed in theory to serve as a touchstone for practitioners reaching the culmination of their careers.

- PRSSA chapter officers largely learned about leadership from each other and their predecessors, yet relied on affiliate organization resources to learn about the profession—knowledge that allowed them to fulfill their primary leadership purpose.

- The PRSSA student officer experience, and by extension that of the chapter’s members, would have been radically different—if not largely inconceivable—without such relationships and the benefits derived from its affiliate relationships.

Conclusions

- While PRSSA chapter officers displayed several behaviors associated with the relational model of leadership (importance of team and group cohesiveness, common effort towards fulfilling organization’s mission, self-awareness), the distinction between officers and members underlies a stewardship orientation that renders servant leadership a better model for assessing their leadership experience.

- While PRSSA student officers demonstrated leadership skills that seemed to serve their individual, chapter, and affiliate organization purposes, the conception of excellent leadership as a critical competency in the field that is central to long-term career success needs to be impressed on students by educators if their intent is to fulfill the mandate of the public relations function as advisers and counselors to senior organizational leaders.