Do Students Perceive Their Certification Program to Prepare Them for Future Success as an Educational Leader

Gail E. Prelli

(University of Bridgeport, USA)

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to measure student perceptions of the effect of the educational leadership program at the University of Bridgeport to prepare them as future leaders. Student Leadership Practices Inventories were given to students exiting the certification program for administration in Connecticut. This study reports the results of the perceptions reported. The average mean and standard deviation for each of the five areas measured by the SLPI is provided with a comparison of the results to national norms.

Key words: educational leadership program evaluation, transformational leadership

1. Purpose

Research continues to be conducted to assess whether or not students in the Intermediate Administrator's Certification Program at the University of Bridgeport feel prepared to assume leadership roles. The study was designed to identify the areas in which students perceive themselves to be most prepared as they exited the program, as well as target areas they fell less prepared. The information gained from the study was shared with the Educational Leadership Department to inform future revision of the program. The results will also be shared with the field of educational research for leadership training, through presentations and publications for educational improvement.

The Educational Leadership Program at the University of Bridgeport was revised in 2012 to ensure close alignment with expectations required by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). The NCATE Standards are based off the National Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards which serve as a foundation for the development and implementation of educational leadership programs. The Common Core of Leading-Connecticut School Leadership Standards (CCL-CSLS) were adopted in June of 2012 and include the performance expectations articulated in the ISLLC standards. The CCL-CSLS serve as the foundation for evaluation of educational leaders in Connecticut. Therefore, this study will use the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (Kouzes & Posner, 1995) which closely aligns with the CCL-CSLS and also reflects the expectations delineated by both NCATE and ISLCC.

2. Conceptual Framework

Theories of transformational leadership frame this study (Leithwood, 1973) as the practices of

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Gail E. Prelli, Ed.D., Assistant Professor, University of Bridgeport; research areas/interests: transformational leadership, university preparatory programs for educational leadership. E-mail: gprelli@bridgeport.edu.

transformational leaders have been shown to promote higher levels of student achievement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Walstrom, 2004) and align closely with the aforementioned standards. Transformational leaders promote interpersonal relationships by encouraging commitment from the members of the organization and involve the members in institutionalizing change (Bass & Avolio, 1993; Bass, 1985). Burns' (1978) definition of transformational leadership demonstrated the need for leaders to include a level of morality as they led followers to work for the good of all over individual interest. Research conducted by Leithwood, Louis, Anderson and Walstrom (2004) identified practices school leaders need to employ to promote higher levels of student achievement. According to their findings (Leithwood et al., 2004), successful leaders establish a clear direction and develop people.

The SLPI was selected for this study since the five transformational leadership practices identified by Kouzes and Posner align with both Leithwood's model of transformational leadership and with the CCL-CSLS. The five areas assessed were: Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act and Recognize and Acknowledge Accomplishments.

3. Methods and Preliminary Results

The intent of the first phase of the research was to be used to inform the professors in the Educational Leadership Department at the University of Bridgeport what the students perceive to be areas of strength and areas of weakness as measured by the SLPI. The means for each of the five areas were reviewed and this information is somewhat useful to the Educational Leadership Department. Overall the means were very high and a review of the percentiles shows the students exiting the program scoring in very high percentiles.

The Student Leadership Profile Inventory (SLPI) has 30 questions that assess the five fundamental practices exemplary leaders employ. It serves as a self-assessment for leaders and aspirant leaders. Thirty participants, who completed the program at the University of Bridgeport, were given a copy of the (SLPI) in May of 2014. Nineteen surveys, (63% participation rate), were returned. The data was reported for the aggregate group. An average mean and standard deviation was reported for each of the five practices measured. Table 1 shows a summary of the results.

Table 1   Average Mean and Standard Deviation of Students Exiting Educational Leadership Program

Practices	Model the way	Inspire Shared Vision	Challenge the Process	Enable others to Act	Encourage the Heart
Mean (30)	25.3	25.8	25.1	25.4	25.9
sd	2.8	3.3	2.9	3.0	3.5

The second phase of the research was to include students completing the SLPI as they enter and exit the program. Twenty surveys were distributed in the fall of 2014 to incoming students. Only three surveys (15% participation rate) were returned. One of the challenges of this research is to increase the participation rate.

Even though only a few scales were returned the data was reviewed. Table 2 shows the average mean and standard deviation for each of the practices. Although it is a very small sample and the means do not show a great difference, (*t- tests* would be done in the future with larger sample sizes) a review of percentile graphs showed a marked difference. A review of the individual percentile graphs supported continuation of the research. Modifications to increase participation will be considered.

Table 2   Average Mean and Standard Deviation of Students Entering Educational Leadership Program

Practices	Model The way	Inspire Shared Vision	Challenge The Process	Enable Others to Act	Encourage The Heart
Mean (30)	21.0	22.3	19.7	23.7	21.3
sd	9.8	4.5	4.9	3.5	4.6

An item analysis was completed to see the statements with the highest and lowest means for each practice. They highest means (5 being the highest) for each practice were as follows:

Model the Way: 4.82 *Follow through on the promises and commitments I make.*

Inspired a Shared Vision: 4.68 *I am up upbeat and positive when talking about what we can accomplish.*

Challenge the Process: 4.31 (3 statements share the highest mean)

> *I look for ways to develop and challenge my skills and abilities.*
> *I search for innovative ways to improve what we are doing.*
> *I make sure that big projects we undertake are broken down into smaller and doable parts.*

Engage Others to Act: 4.84 *I treat others with dignity and respect.*

Encourage the Heart: 4.63 (2 statements share the highest mean)

> *I praise people for a job well done.*
> *I express appreciation for the contributions that people make.*

The lowest averages for each practice were also closely reviewed. The lowest averages are reported below:

Model the Way: 3.58 *I spend time making sure that people behave consistently with the principles and standards we have agreed upon.*

Inspired a Shared Vision: 3.79 *I talk with others about how their own interest can matter by working toward a common goal.*

Challenge the Process: 3.79 *When things do not go as we expected, I ask, "What can we learn from this experience?"*

Engage Others to Act: 3.68 *I support the decisions that other people make on their own.*

Encourage the Heart: 3.79 *I make a point to publicly recognize people who show commitment to shared values.*

The results will be shared with the members of the educational leadership department to determine whether or not these indicators relate directly to realistic expectations for students not yet in leadership positions. The review will also help determine the meaningfulness of using the SLPI for future evaluation.

Individual reports provide a percentile ranking graph that compares the responses within each practice to those of 110,000 students in similar programs. The graph is divided into three sections horizontal lines at the 30th and 70th percentiles. The segments are labeled high, moderate and low. Table 3 reports the results provided on the 19 individual percentile graphs for students exiting the program. The following data was tabulated:

Table 3   Number of Students in Each Segment of the Percentile Ranking

Practices	Model the way	Inspire Shared Vision	Challenge the Process	Enable others to Act	Encourage the Heart
High	14	13	13	7	14
Moderate	4	5	5	10	3
Low	1	1	2	2	2

n = 19

When the percentile graphs are reviewed for the three incoming students, the results fluctuate with the trend showing more in the moderate to low categories. Three responses is not a large enough sample to truly show a trend.

4. Considerations and Questions

Cost is a factor of this research. The SLPI costs approximately $9.00 for each student every time they take the survey. Finding another instrument to use for the purpose of evaluating the program is a goal as well as finding an instrument for students to use to self-assess. It would also be helpful to determine a leadership design to measure individual student growth between the time of starting the leadership program and exiting the program, while maintaining anonymity.

The lack of participation is an issue. Finding a way to increase participation rates is necessary. Also finding a way to measure individual growth over the period of time the student is in the program would be meaningful. It would be necessary to ensure anonymity for each student. It would also be meaningful to provide each student with the comprehensive report that is generated after the information is added to the scoring software.

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