

COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS: SOCIAL CAPITAL AND THE SOFT SKILLS OF LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

In 2016, a leadership conference for community college students was initiated. The impetus for the undertaking was a perception that community college students may not have access to activities focused on social capital and the soft skills of leadership. Community college students are diverse based on age, race, ethnicity, and socio-economic status. They come to campus for classes and may leave immediately after class for jobs or family responsibilities. The parking areas of community colleges are ideal observation points for the transitory nature of the community college. Meetings and discussions with Vice Presidents from two community colleges, led to the leadership conference. The conference included a keynote presentation, 21 concurrent sessions related to social capital and the soft skills of leadership, and students' self-reflections on their leadership skills. Sponsors provided funds for lunch and prizes. The positive results of the first event in 2016 led to a second event in 2017. The manuscript provides details of the initiative.

Background

The basis for the leadership initiative emerged from experiences on community college campuses and discussions with community college leaders at the campuses. During visits to community college campuses, the transitory milieu was apparent. Students arrived at the building doors and walked to meeting rooms or labs. When classes or labs ended, students left the building and the campus. Although the campuses are well equipped with student centers, cafeterias, and lounges, the predominant number of students left the building at the end of sessions. Throughout the buildings, bulletins and newsletters announced activities for students. However, the events were limited. Typical activities announced on bulletin boards and on fliers were movie nights, a summer trip to an amusement park, special days that featured: hot dogs, chips, pop and games; ice cream sundaes and games; pancakes and sausage day; massage day; and wellness day. Each of these events was accessible to students who were on campus who had student IDs. Student organizations or clubs were limited. A student senate and a multicultural club were opportunities for student involvement. Observation of the extensive parking areas on the campuses is a measure of the mobility of the students. Observation of the entryways provides an opportunity to observe the number of individuals in transit at the campuses.

Observations of Community College Students

In comparison to leadership and student involvement opportunities offered for students on a four-year college campus, the opportunities on the community college campus may be limited. The differences may reflect the students served by the community colleges. Students are diverse based on age, race, ethnicity, career intentions, socio-economic status and funding support.

Part time and full time students attend community colleges. Students who have jobs may need to schedule classes based on work schedules. Students may have family responsibilities that influence their ability to be on campus. The ages of students differ and include individuals who are teenagers to those who are 70 years of age or older.

Community college students may be recent high school graduates who intend to pursue a vocational or technical field. Individuals may seek an associate of arts or associate of science degree. Students may be completing courses to meet undergraduate requirements at a four-year college.

Community college students may be adults returning to campus after raising a family. Students may be individuals who are seeking skills for a different vocational or technical field after a job displacement or a workforce reduction.

Community college students may be international students who are recent immigrants. Students may be international individuals who have academic degrees from

international universities who are preparing to enter the U.S. workforce.

Students' needs for college activities beyond the classroom or the laboratory vary based on their life stages. Their reasons for the choice to attend a community college vary as well.

Leadership Initiative

Observations of the transitory aspect of community college students and the programming offered to students on the campuses led to the development of a leadership initiative for community college students. To develop the initiative, community college leaders on two community college campuses were consulted. Their comments and offers of support were fundamental to the development of the initiative.

Key elements of the conversations with the community college leaders were about the expectations of employers communicated to the leaders. These comments included employers' concerns about new employees who come to the work place. The employers reported that the new employees might not be prepared to work a full day. Completion of the work shift on each scheduled day of employment was an employer expectation. Communication skills, interpersonal skills, work attitude, "dressing for success," teamwork, creativity/imagination, willingness to learn, and attention to detail were skills cited by the community college leaders as desirable workplace skills.

The literature on the soft skills of leadership encompasses the skills expected of community college students. The soft skills expected by employers are subjects of research and articles by Andrews and Higson (2008), Chell and Athayde (2011), Ellis, Kisling, and Hackworth (2014), Kyllonen (2013), McCale (2008), Pandey and Pandey (2015), and Weedon and Tett (2013). Soft skill development, assessment, and performance are topics addressed by Brungardt (2011), Chamorro-Premuzic, Arteché, Bremner, Greven, and Furnham (2010), Gibb (2013), Harris and Rogers (2008), Jelphs (2006), and Malhotra (2016).

Based on the discussions with the community college leaders and the literature reviewed, a leadership conference emerged. The intent of the conference was to enhance students' leadership skills, specifically social and interpersonal skills, to provide access to community leaders, to foster students' development of community networks, to focus on students' goals and dreams and to encourage students to look in and look to the future. Collectively, the conference contributes to students' social capital.

Leadership Conference

Speakers from community agencies, business and industry as well as individuals recognized for their leadership accomplishments were invited to present. The focus was on skills expected in work settings. Speakers highlighted their leadership journeys and dreams. Media, such as YouTube clips, were used to highlight leadership skills and encourage conversations with the students. In February 2016, Leadership Skills for the World of Work was held. All community college students on the campuses were invited to attend.

The format for the conference included 21 breakout sessions. Students had a choice of three sessions during each of seven time slots throughout a Saturday. The conference schedule was from 9:30 a.m.-3:00 p.m. The keynote speaker was a community college leader. His presentation, "Dream Big" included his experiences as a young man and his father's influence on his acquisition of work skills. He captured the students' attention because the story was an honest, understandable, humorous and humble report of what made it possible for him to achieve the position he currently holds.

Following the keynote, the students selected breakout sessions to attend. Presenters had topic specialties and held a variety of career positions. Based on the students' engagement in the sessions and their comments about the event, the presenters were well-received and had the "right stuff" according to the students.

Examples of session topics include: Edgy to Elegance: How to Overcome Your Fear of Public Speaking, Your Social Media Impact, Keys to Successful Interviewing, Communication Skills in the Work Environment, Stand Up, "Don't Stand Out," What I "Got" From My Volunteer Experiences, Investing in Yourself, Make Your Presence Count, and Communication is a Two-Way Street.

In each session room, an individual served as convener, collected the students' answers to questions presented to them at the beginning of the session, and punched each student's card to verify session attendance. The basis for the questions was a visionary leadership typology developed by Grady and LeSourd (1989-1990), LeSourd, and Grady (1989-1990). The leadership typology includes goal setting, creating a shared ideology, commitment, risk taking and future orientation. The questions provided the students with an opportunity to reflect on their leadership. The students' responses provide insight to the students' leadership skills and leadership networks.

Sponsors

The host community college provided meeting facilities for the conference. Facilities included a large general session room and three break out rooms. Funding came as donations from individuals, the American Association of University Women, Doane University, Kaplan University and Nebraska Wesleyan University. Community agencies set up tables around the general session room and greeted students, provided handouts and treats to the students. The college representatives set up tables as well. The university recruiters provided handouts, small tokens and treats as well.

Members of the American Association of University Women sat in the general session room with the other sponsors throughout the day. Their commitment and task was to engage the students in conversations and provide a welcoming environment for the students. Because student attendees came from four different campuses, it was important to welcome the students to the conference campus and remind them that the leadership event was designed just for them.

The funds paid for purchase of lunches and morning refreshments for each of the attendees, the sponsors, and the presenters. The funds allowed us to provide a \$5.00 gift card for each student attendee and each of the presenters. Funds allowed the purchase of larger denomination gift cards for gasoline, groceries, and retail outlets such as Target. Other donations included special gifts such as curling irons, hair products, decorator items and gift baskets. One individual donated a large screen television as a major, grand prize.

The drawing for the incentive prizes occurred at the end of the afternoon sessions. To be eligible for a prize, students placed their punch cards from their session attendance in a basket. Students' attendance at a session during each of the time slots was a requirement for prize eligibility.

Student Reflections on Leadership

The students' responses revealed a broad range of leadership skills including communication, problem solving, ability to motivate others, and "getting things done." The students reported their career goals and described what they needed to do to achieve the goals. All of the students identified leaders in their lives. The students noted their accomplishments and provided details about the accomplishments. Students' supporters were family members, friends, instructors and work colleagues. The students provided leadership of or support for family members, friends and co-workers.

Conference Results

Following the first conference, students sent Thank You messages based on their experiences. They also sent requests for contact information for the presenters. The sponsors and presenters described their experiences as very positive.

In discussions with the presenters and sponsors, a common theme was the "thawing of the students" from morning to lunchtime to prize time. In the early part of the conference, the students were shy and uncertain. The conference may have been their first experience at an event such as this one. The choices of sessions to attend and meeting new people may have been a challenge. However, as the day progressed, the students had an opportunity to visit with the presenters, sponsors and other students. The students became more comfortable and confident as they moved from room to room. Lunch in the large room allowed students to visit while they ate. The collective anticipation of the prize phase of the afternoon was an asset.

When the names for prize recipients were drawn, the students' focus was obvious from the front of the room as the students came forward to retrieve their prizes. For each prize awarded, all cheered and applauded. The environment was marked as a supportive, comfortable gathering of individuals who were no longer strangers to each other.

An interesting observation of the prize phase was the students who acknowledged that with the \$5 gift card they could buy milk; or, the students who received \$25 or \$50 dollar gift cards who were delighted because the cards were from local grocery stores. This side note is important for future prize purchases and as a reminder of who the beneficiaries of the conference are.

A result of the success of the first conference will be a second Leadership Skills for the Workplace Conference in 2017.

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