

Student Leadership Development: Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

The purpose of this research is to provide an understanding of how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced the development of student leaders within institutions of higher education. While we understand on a surface level the impact the pandemic has had on overall social, economic, and interpersonal commonalities, it is important to investigate how these disruptions impact the future of our society. Student leadership development is essential in ensuring that society be left in the hands of leaders who are confident in their abilities. Key concepts related to this study include student leadership development pre- and during the pandemic; how those two differ, and what that means for the future of leadership development. Additionally, I will be examining the mental health impacts of the pandemic, and how those changes have influenced, or will influence, leadership development.

Key words: leadership, development, student

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Student Leadership Development: Assessing the Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The purpose of this report is to analyze the impacts to student leadership development created by the COVID-19 pandemic. Student leadership development is the pinnacle of deliverables fostered through higher education. Institutions take the time to develop the holistic individual, preparing them academically, socially, and personally. Building a holistic person takes time, patience, understanding, and communication. As we know, most of our social norms were disrupted and reformatted when the pandemic struck. Personal meetings were changed to online video conference platforms, connections made on a regular basis within the workplace were gone, and societal expectations were replaced with pandemic focused policies and guidelines.

To say this disruption was detrimental to society as a whole would be an understatement. Now, think how those disruptions affect students who are learning to become influential members of this society and community. At Saint Anselm College, my current institution, we have seen a decrease in participation of leadership positions on campus. This is a direct result of the pandemic, and its grip on interpersonal connections, and confidences related to student involvements. Without this participation, students will begin to miss out on influential trainings and programs that will help them develop as that holistic individual.

Research I've included below explains how the pandemic has influenced these programs, and what that means for the future of leadership development within higher education. The mission of leadership development cannot be lost as we continue to work towards normalcy and continue to build our communities back up into recognizable pieces. Additionally, the research shows how the pandemic has influenced mental health within students, and how those changes influence the overall student experience at colleges/universities. The impacts on the student are

the forefront of my research, as it is important to recognize the student pre-pandemic, the student during the pandemic, and the looking towards the student post-pandemic.

I will begin to explain how institutions of higher education have been impacted, what they can do to focus on building student involvement back up, and how they can utilize newfound ways (online) to influence student leadership development.

Literature Review

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has certainly altered many institutional traditions and has forced individuals to rethink how they approach every single thing. In higher education, this is no different. The pandemic has influenced how we provide adequate academics, connect students on a social level, and overall maintenance of community standards. In relation to these ongoing changes, I have focused my research on how the COVID-19 pandemic has influenced student leadership development in institutions of higher education. Throughout this year, we have seen how social standards, traditional interactions, and overall expectations of development of the human mind have been stifled and, in some cases, halted all together. Nowhere is this more prevalent than in higher educational institutions. My research aims to prove how the pandemic has negatively impacted the otherwise expedient growth of the student leader.

First, I will aim to identify what “student leader” means within this capacity. It is important to define how I will be examining this specific type of student outside of the academic world. Second, I will use this definition to interweave my themes relative to the research question. Those themes are:

- Leadership (definitions applicable to student leadership development generally)
- Developing Students (pre-pandemic)
- Developing Students (during pandemic)
- Mental Health Implications and Impacts

By investigating these themes within the context of my research question, I aim to assess the detrimental impacts that the pandemic has had on the development of student leaders, both in training and in preparation for their roles within the institution. This research aims to also prove that academics was not the only area within higher education that was seriously impacted by the pandemic. At Saint Anselm College, we aim to develop a global citizen and holistic individual. This cannot be accomplished by only focusing on the academic side. Therefore, it comes to reason that academics and student affairs play equal footing in the development of the student.

Leadership

In order to understand how the pandemic has influenced student leadership development. We must first base our question in the concepts of leadership, and the importance of student leadership. Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009), the ancient Greek philosopher speaks about the human good. He describes the human good as being akin to happiness (p. 4). Happiness in the self, and happiness given to others. Aristotle took this approach to mean that in order to be happy, one must first satisfy the self, but also keep other's happiness in mind (p. 5). He speaks to this by writing, "now by self-sufficient we do not mean that which is sufficient for a man by himself, for one who lives a solitary life, but also for parents, children, wife, and in general for his friends and fellow citizens, since man is born for citizenship" (p. 11). "Since man

is born for citizenship”; this is how Aristotle’s writing introduce the concept of leadership for this study. As citizens, we aim to work towards the good for all, always keeping in mind what benefit our action brings to the citizenry. This ideal has been interwoven in many facets of student leadership training and development; to be conscious outside of the self, for the benefit of others.

Student leadership development starts at the beginning, as the culture within education can either make or break the development of the students. From a young age, students need to be involved in conversations around expectations, cooperation, and citizenry. As Professors Kiersch and Peters explain in their *Leadership from the Inside Out: Student Leadership Development within Authentic Leadership and Servant Leadership Frameworks* (2017), “Leadership development is a prominent objective in both higher education and business. College and university mission statements commonly reference higher education’s efforts to build community and business leaders, and student leadership development is referenced as a primary goal both within and outside of business schools” (p. 148). To start at a young age would put students in the best possible position to succeed in higher education and beyond. The need to develop leaders in undergraduate communities is indicative of the idiom ‘leaving the world a better place than you found it’. We, as educators (both faculty and staff) need to strive to leave the world a better place, and we can accomplish that through our student leaders.

Kiersch and Peters go on to say in their study, “if student leadership development could be better linked with ethics and more strongly reflect the cumulative evidence of effective leadership development in organizations, we can expect to see a positive ripple effect within communities” (p. 149). This statement alone supports the claim that student leadership development is intrinsically based in ethical development, as Aristotle would agree. The ability

for students to learn how to be successful and influential leaders leads to a positive ripple effect throughout all communities, as the authors claim. Any impact on these programs, developmental models, and trainings could seriously impact, not only individual growth, but the growth of communities.

In *Measuring Mechanisms of Student Voice: Development and Validation of Student Leadership Capacity Building Scales* (2020), the authors claim “research has demonstrated that involving students in authentic leadership positions in schools (i.e., providing opportunities to share their perspectives and take part in school change processes) can have positive effects on youth development in the form of improved peer and adult relationships” (p. 1). The authors explicitly state that leadership opportunities for students allow them to grow and foster healthy communication tactics in order to be successful and influential years beyond graduation. Once again, the importance of student leadership in general is reflected here in this research.

Lyons et. al., in their research, also state “when students are able to lead in ways that inspire and empower others, they become power generators from which their constituents draw energy. In this way, students lift up people in their communities, often despite structural political and social marginalization” (p. 1). Once again, the concept of student leadership, and the importance thereof, are supported here through the author’s continued reinforcement of the impact student leaders have on their community and their constituencies.

Gialamas et. al. describe leadership in students through ethos, empathy, and compassion. These traits, based in those three monikers, are what helps create a holistic student leader, one that will be fully prepared to enter into any career following their development. The authors state that although leadership development programs within higher education are influential, what they teach will not ultimately matter unless we first make sure the students understand what

leadership means, and why it is important (p. 55). The authors write that there are major areas of thinking that need to be taught to students in order for them to fully grasp the importance of leadership; holistic thinking, meaningfulness, harmony, and ethos and ethics (p. 55).

Student leadership, as the authors describe it, must be developed in order to expand the student's horizons, deter complacency, stimulate imagination and creation (p. 56). Leadership needs to be rethought and reshaped in the minds of students. Most times, when the word leadership is elicited, one thinks of positions of power (in a school setting, the principal or dean). The authors posit that the initial thought of leadership should instead evoke concepts pertaining to the collaborative forces needed to drive the student towards an eventful and fulfilling future, not just the individual actions of a student striving for leadership (p. 62). The concept of a collective is intrinsic when developing students through programs at institutions.

Developing Students (Pre-Pandemic)

As we have examined, the development of student leaders in institutions of higher learning is tantamount in preparing them to enter into communities, and to teach them how to be influential in those communities. Institutions of higher education have adapted to utilizing programs and trainings in order to offer the most impactful framing of leadership to students. For Saint Anselm College, we in student affairs take our student leaders, and develop them through the many offerings our college has, including Student Government, Orientation, Service and Solidarity Mission Trips, Peer Ministers, Transition Mentors, Resident Assistants, so on and so forth. These offerings, combined with our larger Student Affairs Leadership Collaborative trainings, continue to provide meaningful and impactful development opportunities for our students.

To frame what I am describing, our Student Affairs Leadership Collaborative (SALC) invites all students who hold a leadership position within an office of the Student Affairs division to partake in this day-long training course. Offerings within this program include Mission & Identity Understanding, Emotional Intelligence trainings, understanding roles and referrals, basic counseling training, and case studies that help apply learned concepts. For our institution, these concepts are of the highest importance when training student leaders.

The development of student leaders can be gaged through their efficacy, and how they influence the community once completed of their trainings. Soria et. al. examined how training programs impacted overall student efficacy by examining known training modules in higher education institutions. The researchers state “students who participated in leadership conferences, retreats, lecture/workshop series, positional leadership trainings, or courses had significantly higher leadership efficacy compared to their peers” (p. 95). The influence that training programs bring to the overall confidence of students is paramount in developing them as leaders. Without these programs, such as our SALC, student leaders are being trained in differing offices, using differing methods and approaches. Training programs offer uniformity in leadership development.

Additionally, Soria et. al. (2020) state that some programs are not beneficial to the student’s development, and that they in fact hinder the growth of the student’s confidence and leadership capabilities. They write,

There could be a few explanations for the mixed results; for instance, some of the programs could require significantly longer time commitments from students. Although they grouped together leadership programs and omitted any opportunity to disaggregate results by specific programs...students’ involvement in programs of a shorter duration

(e.g., a lecture, workshop) or more moderate duration (e.g., a course, workshop series) tended to be more beneficial than longer-term programs (e.g., major, or minor, multi-semester programs) for students' leadership self-efficacy (p. 93).

We need to be mindful of how we create these programs, and examine and take note of what works, and what does not work when we look to revamp annually. The impact these programs have on student's confidence are obvious, but we as educators need to formulate the best experience possible in order to allow for the absorption of information.

Komives and Sowcik (2020) agree that leadership development programs are influential in the overall growth of students, both curricular and co-curricular. They highlight the importance of leadership programs by stating "having a leadership program benefits even those who do not participate as an indirect effect. The peer impact, modeling, and emphasis of leadership in the campus culture influenced a leadership awareness, not present in campuses who have no such emphasis" (p. 24). Their research showed that having programs influence all students and benefit the community as a whole. Without these programs, and the emphasis on these programs, colleges have and will suffer from the lack of student leaders.

Developing Students (during pandemic)

The necessity for leadership trainings within higher education is apparent. With the coming of the pandemic, we were forced to switch all facets of work and life to online. While technological advancements have been a godsend for our population, it does come with some negative elements. For example, when students are thrust behind a computer screen, and rely on that mode of communication for both social and academic occurrences, both social and academic

competencies decrease. Without the face-to-face interaction and coming from a strictly face to face interacting institution, students will falter, and their holistic growth will be compromised.

Turgut Karakose (2021) explains how the pandemic has influenced education systems worldwide, and how it has created one of the largest education crises in history. He agrees that the pandemic has had a negative impact on the educational and social outputs of students. Once education systems began to rely on technological avenues, the advancement of academics and social contrast began to fade (p. 8). The author mentions the lack of interpersonal connections made when adapting to online learning modules. This is paramount in student leadership development, as the tactical tools needed to understand their roles on campus are missing when they are online in the comfort of their own homes.

Karakose does, however, mention that the adaptability of institutions to offer online learning platforms has put institutions in a greater position to continue to offer those types of courses in order to expand their student base. For example, Saint Anselm College never offered remote learning opportunities before the pandemic. Now, we are more likely to adapt online learning platforms and continue to offer and utilize them in order to attract a new base of student. With the positive outlook, Karakose also offers a task to educators, staff, and administrators; we need to continue to look towards creating programs that will curb the tide of the negative effects of the online learning platforms.

Chris Piotrowski and Chula King (n.d.) agree with Karakose's assessment that although the pandemic was detrimental, it did offer a course for institutions to follow in offering more on online platforms. Although all of these authors agree with that finding, there are more negative aspects that they all discuss. Piotrowski and King mention that higher education institutions need to begin/continue to adapt to the changing platforms being created and offered because of the

pandemic. There is an ever-present need for options now, and colleges/universities need to be in tune with what incoming and current students need and expect within this pandemic and beyond. The authors explain that alongside academic and athletic disruptions, there are social disruptions that are happening.

Holzer et. al. (2021) in their research found that self-regulated learning inhibited students from reaching their full potential academically and socially (p. 7-8). When the pandemic struck, students were forced to remove themselves from the classroom, and adopt a new style of learning techniques, which the authors have dubbed “self-regulated”. This type of learning style is contingent upon the motivation of the student, what they can bring themselves to accomplish while isolated at home. The authors found that while isolated, the students lacked any true motivation to put strong effort into their works (p. 8). This is due to the fact that students lacked interactions that would otherwise provide them with continued motivations (faculty, staff, peers).

This lack of motivation has continued through reentry onto campuses. When students returned in the fall of 2020, to campuses with strict policies and guidelines, they continued to feel the lack of motivation, and once again began to slip academically and socially (p. 7). The authors state that socially, students were less likely to engage in virtual and/or restricted events/programs/leadership opportunities (p. 8). For example, students who entered into colleges as new students this past fall were not introduced to the same traditions, events, programs, and engagement opportunities as they would have been in a normal year. This lack of participation is directly linked to their comfort in isolation, their fear related to contracting/harboring the virus, and their inability to connect socially (in person) with their peers during a time of restriction and isolation (p. 9).

In an almost poignant response to the author's assertions explained above, Alyssa Ackbar (2020), a student at Florida State University, researched the effects of the pandemic on the college student's life, and found that although isolationism has produced many barriers, students of today's generation have found ways to continue to be motivated and find purpose in their work (p. 3). Ackbar attributes this need to stay motivated due to the rhythms and machinations of a daily schedule that we are all used to. Students in her study found ways to motivate themselves and their peers through social media and other technological advances (p. 3).

Although college students continue to self-motivate through technology and connection with their peers virtually, the participants in Ackbar's study still mentioned that the lack of in person connection was stifling when it comes to overall growth and perceptions of self (p. 6). Ackbar mentions that although everyday normalcy has been disrupted, the students in her study were optimistic that a return to normalcy will help reestablish social norms and expectations, including involvements and participation in on campus offerings (p.7).

Students cannot connect like they used to. There is no social aspect to the college life that they once knew or expected. This makes it that much more difficult to create an on-campus network, which grants students the opportunity to become more involved, and to seek out positions where they can learn to hone their leadership abilities.

Mental Health Implications and Impacts

We can all agree that the pandemic has influenced us not only on a societal, economic, and communal level, but also on deep personal levels. This is nowhere more prevalent than in higher education institutions, where students are impressionable, worried, and controlling of their experience. So, when that experience becomes upended, the mental health of students

needs to be supported. From experience, I know that the minute we “shut down” the world, our need for counseling services rose dramatically, even with virtual offerings only. On our campus, we could not keep up with the requests to see counselors, sometimes putting students on a week to two weeks wait. Mental health is the most important aspect of a student’s experience, and the pandemic certainly made students feel more paranoid, anxious, and unsupported.

In higher education, we have seen an increase in mental health issues as the years go on. At Saint Anselm College, between 2018 and 2019, we saw an increase in need for counseling services, from 114 students requesting counseling in 2018, to 203 students in 2019. This jump has been attributed to the generational shifts when it comes to independence and anxiousness related to that independence. Mental health issues are a continuing trend in higher education, and one that student affairs professionals need to maintain and observe.

Worsley et. al (2021) focus, in their research, about the need to create environments within colleges and universities that accommodate this increase in mental health issues, and work to create comfort in students attending these institutions. In their research, they attribute in part, the increase in mental health issues and needs to the change in living, going from home to shared spaces and shared experiences, with strangers. This obviously plays into the student’s psyche, and how they can handle this immediate, abrupt, and drastic change (p.3).

The authors discuss the importance comfort spaces have in deterring issues with mental health. For example, the first couple of months of a student’s experience can be the loneliest, since they are nervous and anxious to make friends in an unfamiliar place (p. 5). Alongside loneliness comes social isolation, where the student spends most of their time alone, in their rooms or in isolated places on campus so as to escape the anxiousness associated with assimilating within a new group (p.7).

As the authors note, loneliness and social isolation increase issues associated with mental health. All of these experiences, but most importantly the loneliness and social isolation factors, also inhibit students from reaching their full potential, and assimilating into the culture of the institution through networking and involvements. This, added with the fallout of the pandemic, is influential in the growth of students, particularly in areas of leadership. Even with a normal year, and normal anxieties surrounding assimilation, students eventually find themselves, their friends, and their involvements. With the pandemic, however, first year students especially do not know what a normal year at a college can look like, and without that experience, are not keen on jumping in and involving themselves socially.

Relatedly, the authors discuss the importance of self-development in a normal experience, and how that can influence a student's ability to become more comfortable with their surroundings. For example, the authors explain that when students live alongside others with differing backgrounds, cultures, countries, religions, etc., the student values the learning opportunity and begins to become more comfortable (p. 7). During the pandemic, these opportunities were thwarted, as students were asked to stay in their rooms, or only interact physically with people with whom they will have constant interactions with (i.e., roommates). Without the ability for students to interact with their peers, they lose out on learning about the development of the self they so desperately need in these formative years. This lack of social interaction directly impacts student leadership development. Without these opportunities, students, both tenured and new, were not afforded the normal opportunities to get involved, and elevate their leadership skills through those involvements.

Cooley-Fruehwirth, Biswas, and Perreira (2021) discuss the effect the pandemic has had on the mental health of college aged students. The authors focused on researching how

drastically anxiety rose in students from pre-pandemic to the first couple of months of the pandemic. Their insights saw a major spike in anxiety based mental health issues within those first few months, reinforcing what I stated earlier about the influx in counseling services requested.

Freuhwirth et. al. (2021) agreed that the mental health of college aged students was drastically affected by the pandemic. Within those effects were a decrease in social participation online through the various platforms offered by colleges (p. 3). This lack of participation is not doubt associated with the distance felt both physically and emotionally when interacting with people through a screen. The mental health of students has been affected through the lack of in person social interactions. The authors explain that even with the shutdown of schools last March, students would continue to feel that separation through the summer, where they normally cannot interact with their peers from campus (p. 5). This daunting feeling of separation was exacerbated by the quick and sudden shut down of campuses (and the world) last year.

Tasso et. al. also examined how the pandemic influenced what they call the “socioemotional” aspects of college students experiences. The authors note that although college aged students are some of the least influenced medically by the pandemic, they are some of the most psychologically influenced amongst our community (p. 10). In their study, the authors found the exorbitant number of students felt impacted by the pandemic, relative to home life, living situations, fear of self, others, and family contracting the virus and falling severely ill, and the lack of interpersonal connection that is so desperately needed in these formative years (p. 12).

The authors found that beside all of the implications towards academic struggles, students were also less engaged, both socially and physically, with the experiences of the college. The

authors mention that their test subject reported feelings of academic related distress, mental health distress, alongside interpersonal disengagement struggles being motivated, boredom, anxiety, and depression (p. 12). These feelings are detrimental to the development of strong student leaders. Once again, the examination of the lack of interpersonal engagement proves that leadership development, and overall nonacademic engagement is suffering due to the pandemic, and the subsequent policy changes adopted.

Analysis

Based on the research utilized above, I can confidently claim that the pandemic had an overwhelming negative effect on the ability of colleges/universities to successfully develop students in their leadership abilities. Initially, I assumed that although the lack of face-to-face interaction was prevalent in all aspects of higher education this past year, institutions would adapt and excel in utilizing online formats to continue to interact and develop their students more fruitfully, and in conjunction with development they would have experienced in person. My research showed that although institutions did adapt and attempt to maintain the same level of development processes online, the overall retention, participation, and excitement surrounding these opportunities were lost without the on the ground aspect.

As my research showed, the affect online-only interactions had on the overall psyche of the student impacted their ability to effectively interact socially with their peers. This shift in interaction, particularly for first year students, negatively impacted their confidence, and restricted them from building networks and social circles. Without the ability to effectively interact with and befriend their peers, students were less likely to join clubs and organizations, and less likely to apply for and join leadership programs across campuses (tutors, orientation leaders, resident assistants, impact fellows, etc.).

Additionally, aside from the impact to the student behavior, institutions themselves fought an uphill battle in terms of developing strong and influential leadership development programs through online formats. For example, at Saint Anselm College, we developed an on the ground leadership development course that usually takes a full Saturday to complete, with multiple parts, interactive, seminar based, and role play based, in order to effectively develop our student leaders. When the pandemic happened, we needed to reformat all of our lesson plans into an online module. This change, albeit with the same information and activities, was not conducive to our original vision for this training program. Without the interface on the ground, the students could not fully grasp the lessons we wanted and needed them to learn in order to be a more influential student leader.

Through my research, I found that other institutions fit a similar pattern, where their online development programs gave the necessary information, but did not yield the same results in terms of retention and application. The shift to online platforms certainly has had a negative impact on overall student development, which also translates to how campuses reacted when they brought the student back on the ground. While online platforms had their own issues in student development, I would argue that on the ground restrictions played an equally significant role in stifling student leadership development. My research showed that many institutions sought to bring their student bodies back onto campus in the fall of 2020, and in doing so created an exuberant number of guidelines and restrictions in response to the continuing pandemic.

The restrictions and guidelines ranged from stay in place orders, quarantine and isolation housing, restrictions on entering certain buildings, capacities limitations, and constant mask requirements in and outdoors. These restrictions, although necessary, were damaging to the mental health of students. You could imagine the excitement students had returning to campus

after being removed from their peers so abruptly in the spring, that when they returned and learned they were limited to their dorm for interaction, they reverted to no social interaction for fear of breaking the rules and/or getting sick from the virus.

This lack in confidence to build a social network, to effectively interact with their peers, and to be in constant fear of breaking rules limited students from grasping hold of all college offerings, especially joining extracurricular activities through programming and club and organization efforts. This lack of participation effected student leadership efforts throughout the campus experience. For example, the Residential Life team at Saint Anselm College saw many of their current Residential Assistants refuse to continue their work after the first semester, because they were overworked and expected to uphold their peers to a higher standard in following the rules and guidelines. This resulted in the RLE staff seeing a dramatic dip in their applicants for the 21/22 year, which made them extend their application deadline and search for help recruiting students to become RAs.

Recommendations

This study would have been greatly amplified by a study directly examining the impact of leadership development with students. I would have liked to create a meaningful questionnaire for our student leaders/student body at Saint Anselm College, that would have examined mental health impacts and their relation on the overall experience of the student, and how those factored into the student's willingness to participate and interact with campus life during the pandemic.

Unfortunately, during the time where I begin to explore my research topics, the students were preparing for final examinations, and departure from campus. As many of us know who work in higher education, this timeframe (final exams and departure) usually means that students

will be the least responsive to “extra work” (my survey) and/or emails in general. I chose not to pursue the creation and dissemination of a survey for those reasons alone. Again, my research, and the research surrounding this topic in general, would have been supported more fully through a survey related to this topic directly.

Conclusion

The impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on higher education in totality cannot be overlooked. Both academic, and student affairs, suffered from the yoke brought on by the pandemic. The shifts in learning and experiences were abrupt, and vastly different than what a usual student may experience in their time at a college or university. This year and a half of restrictions, guidelines, varying expectations, and social limitations certainly has impacted the operations of higher education institutions, as well as the overall mental health of students. The students impacted by the pandemic will need some time to reformulate their confidence, find themselves within an erupting campus life, and begin once again, to mold themselves into holistic beings.

It is important to remember and examine how institutions of higher learning reacted to, and changed with, the pandemic. In no uncertain terms, we can see that that colleges/universities were vastly impacted by the pandemic, and that those who adapted and fought for their normalcy will continue to offer high level, impactful, academic and cocurricular experiences in the years to come. This pandemic was a challenge, and the lessons learned during this time will not soon be forgotten. We learned how to exist on a strictly online platform, how to operate and work through Zoom, Teams, and Google Suites, and how to become social beings in a not so social world. Students need to understand that this way of life is not permanent, and that once again, they will return to a more fruitful, more impactful, and more social campus life.

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