VALENCIACOLLEGE

The Valencia College Leadership Academy:

"xxxx"

opening

The purpose of the focus groups was to gather feedback from students (N=12) from across the campuses. The focus groups were also held to document their thoughts about leadership directly after their Academy activities. The student focus groups were conducted on Friday June 1st by Laura Blasi, Kurt Ewen, and Jerry Reed on the west campus in collaboration with Chanda Torres, Director, Student Development.

The following report provides details about the design of the focus groups, it describes the qualifications of the focus group leaders, and it outlines the four research questions that guided the data collection and report. The "Summary of Results" provides six key findings. The second half of the report describes the program, documents its theoretical framework, and it outlines the detailed results of the focus groups. Discussion of the interpretation of the results and suggestions regarding next steps are offered at the end of the report.

Series description
Poverty
Focus groups

Contents

Design of the Study

The Purpose of the Focus Groups: In addition to gathering immediate feedback on the academy, over the long term the focus groups will inform the development of (1) a Student Leadership Program Model to be implemented to wide range of students and (2) the learning outcomes assessment plan for Student Development.

Background of Researchers: The recorder, Jerry Reed, ____ has been trained to conduct focus groups working with an external consultant, Thor, brought in to train a team within Valencia able to lead these kinds of discussions. Kurt Ewen, Assistant Vice President of Assessment and Institutional Effectiveness, was one of the facilitators and also trained by Thor ____. Laura Blasi, Director, Institutional Assessment, was trained at the University of Virginia and has subsequently conducted groups and taught interview methods at the graduate-level. She collaborated with Chanda Torres, _____, on the development of this report.

Research Questions that Guided the Focus Groups:

1) How is the Leadership Academy experience described by students?
2) Do the themes of the Leadership Academy surface in their group conversations?
3) How are the themes and their related vocabulary or ideas evident in the discussion?
4) What has been the impact of the Academy – as reported by students?

Purpose of the Academy: The Student Leadership and Engagement Academy is a four-part introduction to leadership and personal development for student leaders at all levels. The academy engages them in seminars, experiential learning and community service projects. The program included presentations, projects, and speakers. The curriculum focuses on leadership and personal development, community outreach and team building. The Academy was designed around three themes: Leadership, Career Development / Professional Development, and Personal Development.

. Published Theory

2. Working Theory

3. Emerging Theory

4. External Viewpoints

Background of Participants: Students at Valencia College who participated in the focus groups had completed 3 of the 4 components of the Summer Leadership Academy program. They had been engaged in 3 days of activities – including a community service project – within a structured leadership and personal development curriculum. The majority of the students who participated in the focus groups had enrolled in the Academy at the suggestion of their Valencia college supervisors.   The students who were in the focus group learned about the academy from their supervisors; the majority reported having jobs on one of the campuses. The campuses were evenly represented – with 12 students all together selected at random from the sign-in sheets collected by the academy staff.

Summary of Results: Six Key Findings

The focus groups revealed the following:

1.   The students valued getting to know students from other campuses and working with their supervisors in a new setting – outside of their regular workplaces.

2.   There were conflicting comments regarding the length of the experience, with several students also suggesting the Academy include a retreat off campus.

3.   Most often students mentioned that they realized the importance of expressing themselves as leaders and being true to their own personalities.

4.   They most often reported wanting to develop their skills further in relation to understanding themselves, becoming more confident, and strengthening their communications skills.

5.   In their discussion of the Community Service project students emphasized how much they had learned from observing their activity leaders from Valencia.

6.   Of the three themes used to create the Academy experience, students in conversation concentrated on the impact of the activities focused on personal growth and leadership skills. Their impressions of any career growth activities and discussions did not seem to be raised in the focus groups.

Student Perspectives: A Closer Look at the Focus Group Discussions

- **Their Perspectives on the Academy Offerings:** Many students stated that the activities were fun, that the academy was a good learning experience, and that they valued connecting with other student leaders so all can get along and work together across campuses. One student commented that she felt the Academy "was too long" and another student noted that she did not want to be there at first but was glad she participated – two others reported sharing this feeling. Still another said she signed up before learning it was mandatory for her and was also glad she did it. We heard a range of responses; the majority of the responses were positive.

- **Meals Made a Difference, Even More Retreat Time Suggested:** They mentioned that the meals were very important, beyond helping with their budgets they thought the choices showed that they were being cared for – different than typical offerings at other events and also nutritious. The toys on the table as an icebreaking activity when they arrived made them happy.   Several of the students emphasized the value of intensive experiences, referring often to the retreats that have been held and suggesting that such an offering be included in the Academy "even if it means having us chip in $10" or "holding it at a less expensive hotel." Another student suggested that one of the meals be held off campus as a way to foster the experience of "getting outside of your comfort zone."

- **Observation of Leaders was Key within the Community Service Project**: As mentioned prior, students reported learning from their observations of activity leaders. Several students noted that they began to recognize the importance of empathy and being able to "put yourself in someone else's shoes" as a leadership skill. One student described her experience working with a leader who "made the extra effort." This community service supervisor jumped into the activity - helping others in the setting and tackling a complicated project rather than standing back and directing the students. In this way the supervisor provided a role model, and three other students nodded in agreement when this was discussed. Another student described her experience watching a leader negotiating a conflict between two managers at a community service setting; a different student chimed in that this is a conflict she faces in her work at Valencia.

Reflections on the Three Themes Included in the Academy

Two of the three key Academy themes were most often evident in their comments:

- **Personal growth…** In terms of personal development, all students agreed and mentioned repeatedly the importance of being "true to yourself." They also emphasized the game played during the experience that allowed them to question and identify the aspects of their lives that

are most important. Many reported "how lucky they were" when they saw others who did not have family or very many goals to share during the activity.

- **Leadership skills...** They learned several different skills that are important for leaders, such as "getting along with different people." Expressing appreciation and acting on empathy are also important. "You are only a leader if you want to be," one said. Another affirmed this, saying: "you have to strive for it" as opposed to letting it happen.   Another noted that the academy was a really good way to learn how to delegate work within a club.

Their reflections on career growth were often folded into their discussions of leadership rather than as a distinct topic. In regard to careers, most often dwelled on the lunchtime speaker who shared how she dealt with unemployment, persisting even when she was not able to find a job.

Additional Comments from Students

I They Described Several Characteristics of Leaders

- Awareness
- Enthusiasm
- Integrity
- Know Yourself
- Listening
- Personality

II Students referred to specific speakers...

- Discussion of ways to deal gracefully with unemployment was powerful for them
- They learned some steps for career development (defining a major, the Career Center.)
- The speaker who used salsa dancing – they found him very energizing
- They valued having more time to get to know a speaker and also have their lunches.
- One noted that the speaker sat with him for 45 minutes and was appreciative of this.

III They described some of the greatest challenges leaders face...

- What do you do with leaders that aren't good… who are corrupt?
  (They are not truly leaders; you cannot follow them – remarked a student.)
- You cannot always give advice out of your comfort zone.
- Distinguish between co-workers and friends on the job.

IV They reported becoming more comfortable with colleagues Valencia college …

Students who attended the Academy highly valued their interaction with others at Valencia. The students especially valued getting to know students from other campuses – "it is good to visit other campuses and know you have a friend there." They said they met many people they did not know before. They appreciated being able to see staff – supervisors – in a different setting. One supervisor was characterized as very serious at work was then described as "goofy" in the context of Academy activities.   The student telling the story said she would now feel comfortable talking with that person with a problem or for advice. "We can rely on each other" another said of his supervisor.

Interpreting the Results and Acting on Findings

As with any focus group, the results are developed from discussions with a subset of students – in this case twelve participated. The value in the findings are that they provide insights that we are unable to capture in a survey as students interact with each other and respond to questions that develop during the session. The results from focus group discussions are not meant to be representative of the whole population of students; for this reason decision-making is often better informed by both focus groups and a survey more broadly distributed. It is possible to identify a few findings that may be useful in the development of next steps for the Academy. Returning to the research questions that guided the focus groups, we can consider the research questions and possible next steps:

1) How is the Leadership Academy experience described by students?

    Overall the students reported positive experiences; they may be the best advocates for telling other students about the Academy next year and in this way they could increase the students'

understanding of the purpose of the experience before they begin. The length of time and intensity of the experience received mixed responses – it may be that the schedule and the rationale for the design can be communicated in a different way so that students understand the connection between how it is structured and the program goals and intended outcomes.

2) Do the themes of the Leadership Academy surface in their group conversations?

The themes were apparent, however career growth was less often mentioned; it may be that the activities can focus on this theme in a different way if this remains part of an intended Academy outcome for next summer. It could also be that "personal growth" is the theme they are more ready to consider now; perhaps career growth is thought of as further down the road. Or – it may instead be that this is an area that students are less able to relate to at this time in their lives and do not think of as part of their plan for the future. Most likely there is a mix of these responses to be found across the students in the Academy.

3) How are the themes and their related vocabulary or ideas evident in the discussion?

Students focused on skills such as "empathy" and seem to have taken important lessons about leadership skills from the speakers' stories. Their observations of Community Service leaders were also frequently mentioned. The Academy themes most often surfaced within their recollection of these experiences (retelling what they saw.) The students did not make references to concepts or ideas about leadership in the focus groups. For example, they did not mention any terms from structured materials (such as readings, presentations, or structured journal experiences.) If such materials were used then perhaps it would be worth it to reframe them. Any structured materials used next year could aim for the development of a shared language regarding leadership skills. This might help them to be better able to talk about the skills and articulate what they have learned. It is possible this vocabulary could be shared across the cohort in ways that were not evident in the focus groups in June.

4) What has been the impact of the Academy – as reported by students?

Students have reported their interest in continued personal development; this means it may be helpful to offer follow-up opportunities related to developing some of the skills they report being interested in (such as the development of better communications skills.) While there are other findings related to the impact of the Academy described in this report, "personal development" is one area of possible future action within the Student Development activity offerings.

Response to the Report with Next Steps: Chanda Torres, Director of Student Development, has planned a few next steps. As a result of the focus group, the department will also conduct an overall survey to evaluate the experience. It is intended to capture the students' feedback on the program, what they learned from the program components, and any recommendations for future academies. The Student Development Leadership Team will then review the data for improvement and the attainment of learning outcomes. The academy research will serve as one program under the development of a future comprehensive Leadership Program Model.

I am still developing the focus group report –
I would like to add three sections (or points…)
1. Published Theory
2. Working Theory
3. Emerging Theory
4. External Viewpoints
~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~
1. Question for you – Is there a key idea, concept, or reference
externally published for item 1 that forms the basis of the program?
(What is it… I imagine there are central theories in Student Affairs
About student development….)

The Student Development Theories:

"Victim vs. Creator" Mentality – Downing

The Student Development Theories:
- Alexander Astin's Theory of Involvement
- Arthur Chickering's Seven Vectors of Student Development

They enjoyed the ropes course.

The time spent was too long, next year should be shorter.

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Students are learning from observing and can retell stories but need more structured activities to development of a shared language regarding leadership skills. This might help them to be better able to talk about the skills and articulate what they have learned.

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2. Question for you – Is there a key idea, concept, etc.
that Valencia builds on, has learned, works from etc.?
This is "local wisdom" or internal ideas underlying
This program and perhaps programs like it here.
LifeMap Concept
Strategic Plan Alignment
Learning Outcomes Alignment
3. Question for me – I will articulate a theory
(emerging) from the data for your to help build / respond to, etc.
4. May I share the findings with faculty to get their insights –Great Idea.
for example psychology, sociology, education? You do not have to
use their comments but it 1) draws on the
resources / expertise we have here and 2) includes more faculty and
allows them to see your work in action and learn more about their students in that way....
What do you think? Could you let me know by Monday end-of-day?
If you want to e-mail back Q1 and Q2 answers please do....
Laura