The Tale of Student Ambassador Leadership

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Saint Mary’s College

“Enter to learn, leave to serve”
Liberal Arts, Catholic, Lasallian
Sesquicentennial - 2013
Collegiate Seminar
Jan Term

By the Numbers
2,800 undergraduates, 1,400 graduates
12:1 student to faculty ratio
21 students: average class size
A little more on Saint Mary’s

Located in Moraga (East Bay), California
23 miles east from San Francisco
Between the 2 best ice cream places in the U.S.

Member of West Coast Conference (WCC)
14 Division I Teams
2012 WCC Men’s Basketball Champions
2012 Men’s Soccer Elite Eight finalist
Top 5 Men’s Rugby Program
Our Program Motto

Deliver Exceptionally.
Student Ambassador Role

Front Desk

Oversee Scheduling and smcadmit email account

Concierge

Hospitality and Visitor Center Upkeep

Storymaker

Performing Artist
Student Ambassador Duties

25 High Functioning Student Workers

Work 6-10 hours per week (i.e. meetings, data entry, variety of tours, hospitality etc.)

Manage various personalized visit experiences (Ambassador Coordinators & Senior Ambassadors)

Support all Preview Days and Spring Visit Programs (interviews, class visits, meetings etc.)
Introduction

This project describes an action research/collaborative inquiry project to explore how student ambassadors are developing twenty-first century leadership abilities.
Student Ambassador Leadership

Research Topic:

What twenty-first century leadership abilities are student ambassadors developing?

Identifying improvisational abilities as the leadership approach that student ambassadors utilize.
Leadership Development Context

The student ambassador position is a high functioning role and a prestigious position on college campuses.

The student ambassador position is a high performing student paraprofessional.
The Research Opportunity

By examining the current leadership skills one can assess what abilities are being developed and future needs.

This identifies how the ambassador is prepared for postgraduate success as a twenty-first century leader.
Purpose of the Project

Leadership Stage & Leadership Performer

Leadership Stage:
- Promote leadership practice

Leadership Performer:
- Engage the audience
6 Participants

Director of Student Ambassador Program
1 Ambassador Coordinator – Three years
2 Senior Ambassadors – Two years
2 Ambassadors – First year
Action research is action, experience-based and invites participation.

Collaborative inquiry (CI), a likeminded group that come together to explore a topic. The research is shared, lived experience.

Appreciative inquiry is driven by the positive question.
Action Research Steps

AR possesses “planning, acting, observing and reflecting…a cycle of research efforts” (Kuhne & Quigley, 1997, p. 24).

Action to observing to reflection.

Collaborative inquiry (CI) was incorporated to engage the student ambassadors as co-researchers.
Validity Procedures

The research cycle provided multiple cycles of action research.

This allowed the participants to both re-evaluate and reflect on results.
“Primary purpose of action research is to produce practical knowledge that is useful to people in the everyday conduct of their lives” (Reason & Bradbury, 2006, p. 2).

Promoting growth and providing a learning lab.
Synthesis Project timeline

January 2012  Meeting #1, Intro and Action Item #1
January 2012  Meeting #2, Reflection and Action Item #2
February 2012 Meeting #3, Reflection and Action Item #3
February 2012 Meeting #4, Reflection and Action Item #4
March 2012   Meeting #5, Final Reflection
Thomas D. Bailey:

“Conductors of great symphony do not play every musical instrument; yet through leadership the ultimate production unified combination of tones.”
What aspects of training have been helpful to your development?

What aspects of training have been ineffective?

Ask 2 ambassadors to identify 3 – 5 essential skills to be successful as an ambassador
The skill I have developed the most on this job is…
Professionalism (6), Flexibility, Team Skills (2)

The skill I need to develop more is…
Team skills (6), Flexibility, Professionalism (2)

The skill that this job does not expose me enough to is…
Team skills (7), Flexibility, Professionalism
The skill I hope to be proficient at when I "graduate" from the ambassador program is… Professionalism (6), Flexibility (2), Team Skills

The skill that will help me most in my future endeavors is… Professionalism (6), Team skills (3)

Overall: Professionalism (21), Team Skills (19), Flexibility (5)
Chinese Proverb:

“A bird does not sing because it has an answer. It sings because it has a song.”
What are you surprised about? What jumps out at you?

What kind of conclusions can we draw from the results?

Any new understanding of our terms after this exercise?

Identifying Duties & Responsibilities with Skills
2nd action results

Skill & Role Match-up Survey

Front Desk: Organization and Communication.

Hospitality: Adaptability and Initiative.

Campus Tours: Improvisational skills and Engagement
"In recognizing the humanity of our fellow beings, we pay ourselves the highest tribute."
Observation – Theme of improvisational skills.

The ability to be flexible, engaging, present and professional are improvisational skills.

These improvisational skills are twenty-first century leadership skills of paying attention (observation), facing the facts (interpretation) and acting now (intervention).
This action item built on the team’s shared storytelling experience:

Discussed moments where improvisational skills were utilized (i.e. dealing with a busy situation at the front desk, managing a situation at an event etc.)
Edward Hopper:

“More of me comes out when I improvise.”
Discussing Leadership and Improv

What’s your improv highlight?

What’s you improv lowlight?

What have you learned about yourself through improv?
Abraham Lincoln:

“The best thing about the future is that it comes one day at a time.”
Meta analysis and final reflections

1) How do improvisational skills acquired in the student ambassador role help you in other aspects of your life?

2) How will improvisational skills help you in your professional journey?

3) How is leadership an improvisational art?
Project Outcomes

1) Tell the story of the student ambassador position

2) Highlight their developing leadership skills.

To identify the developing twenty-first leadership abilities, we (1) engaged the current student ambassadors (2) reviewed training programs and (3) identified key job functions/skills.
What did we learn?

We gathered key pieces of information:

1) Skills to be a successful student ambassador

2) Matched those skills to key job functions

3) Improvisational skills like adaptability, humor, engagement & professionalism are twenty-first century leadership traits developing in the student ambassador role
Moving forward

Defined purpose of moving the student ambassador program forward by learning how we can better apply improvisational skills.

Revamped Spring learning modules for new ambassadors and developing a new refresher module in the Fall.
Further Questions

How will I incorporate returning student ambassadors as part of the new learning modules?

How will the refresher learning module look like in the fall?

Are additional learning modules needed throughout the year?
Final Thought

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky write,

“Leadership is an improvisational art. You may have an overarching vision, clear, orienting values, and even a strategic plan, but what you actually do from moment to moment cannot be scripted” (2002, p. 73).
Thank You!

Questions about the action research/collaborative inquiry process and the impact on the student ambassador program?