**The Current State of Youth Leadership Development Programs in Nebraska**

**Introduction**

Young leaders are an underutilized resource that can significantly impact a community’s human resource portfolio, as such, their development is essential as the vast transfer of wealth ($75 trillion by 2060; Macke, Markley, & Binerer, 2011) and shift in leadership (56 percent of all management occupations transferred within 20 years; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012) the United States will experience. Currently, metrics for determining the impacts of leadership development and leadership education efforts are severely inadequate (Kellerman, 2013; Klau, 2006). Because of this, we have insufficient evidence to validate which efforts actually promote the influential capacity of young leaders. Community resources are limited and students are only getting busier, so we must be able to present economically minded justification that our youth leadership development programs are actually developing young leaders in ways that are positively influencing communities.

The research question of this study is, “What is the state of youth leadership development programming in Nebraska?” To address this question, information from youth leadership development organizations were collected to address the following questions:

1. How does your organization conceptualize/define leadership?
2. What educational techniques does your program use to teach leadership?
3. How does your organization assess leadership development of the youth?
4. How does your organization assess the success of their programs?
5. How many people have participated in the program?
6. How long has the program been running?
7. What is your target population?
8. Is there a cost associated with your program?

**Methods**

**Program Inclusion**

To identify youth leadership development programs, the following criteria were selected: 1) the organization/program's mission statement needed to include youth leadership development as one of its primary goals, and 2) the organization/program's target age range must be youth ranging from 6th grade to 12th grade.

To begin finding programs to include in the research "Youth leadership development in Nebraska" was entered into a Google search. At the time of the search, 32 pages of results were produced. A member of the research team reviewed each entry, searching for mission statements and the age ranges of the target population to determine if the organization/program met the inclusion criteria. From the initial search, 19 total organizations met the criteria. Additionally, each organization contacted was also asked if they knew of any other youth leadership development programs, and if so, if they could provide the name and contact information. An additional six organizations were included in the project.

**Procedure**

In order to address the research question, the researchers collected information from each organization to answer the following questions:

1. How does your organization conceptualize/define leadership?
2. What educational techniques does your program use to teach leadership?
   1. Choose from the following list of signature pedagogies in leadership education (Jenkins, 2012): Case studies, Class/group discussion, Exams, Games, Group projects/presentations, Guest speaker, Icebreakers, In-class short writings, Individual leadership development programs, Interactive lesson/discussion, Interview of a leader, Lecture, Media clips, Quizzes, Reflective journals, Research project/presentation, Role-play activities, Self-assessments/instruments, Service learning, Simulation, Small group discussion, Story/storytelling, Student peer teaching, and Teambuilding
3. How does your organization assess leadership development of the youth?
4. How does your organization assess the success of their programs?
5. How many people have participated in the program?
   1. Annually?
   2. Total?
6. How long has the program been running?
7. What is your target population?
   1. Age/grade?
   2. Interest (e.g. FBLA is business, underrepresented populations, etc)
   3. Is the program application based/restrictive?
8. Is there a cost associated with your program?

Each organization's website was visited to collect relevant information. After collecting as much data as was available, initial contact with each organization was made through email on December 15th, 2015. The email explained the research project and asked to set up a phone interview with someone who works directly with the program; programs that made contact were scheduled for a 15 minute phone interview (the questions above served as the script). Programs that did not respond to the initial email by January 25th, 2015 were contacted again through another email, and a phone call using available contact information. Organizations that had not responded to the second email or phone call by February 20th, 2015 were all contacted again by phone, at least once, and up to five times; voice mails were left if the option was available. Contact with these organizations was sought until March 9th, 2016, giving roughly three months of opportunity for these organizations to participate in research.

Information from the organization/program websites were entered into a database. During the interview, the information collected was verified, and any missing data was collected by the interviewer. After interviews were completed, the researchers determined that the sponsor of the program would add to the understanding about the state of leadership development programming in Nebraska. Thus, this information was added using interview data or information posted to the program website. In total, the researchers were able to collect data from 14 programs.

**Results**

The data from each organization regarding name, sponsor, year founded, number of participants (current and total), age of, definition of leadership, assessment of youth leadership development, assessment of program success, application process, and cost for participation is included in table 1.

Question one determined if each program used a definition of leadership. One out of the fourteen organizations interviewed had a definition leadership. All other organizations had conceptualizations about what leadership may look like or how leadership may be executed, however, an official definition of leadership for the purpose of programming was not articulated.

The teaching techniques used in different programs was assessed with the second question (see figure 1.). Icebreakers and group/class discussions are used by every youth leadership organization interviewed, whereas techniques like exams and quizzes are relatively rare in the leadership programs. Another pattern worth noting is the infrequency of introspective, practical application, and reflective exercises used with the youth. Educational activities like case studies, in-class short writings, individual leadership development programming, and reflective journaling are used by less than half of the youth leadership development programs.

Question three determined if organizations use formal assessments to measure the development of leadership in the youth participants after going through the curriculum. Eight organizations formally assess their participants after completing the curriculum to see if there is any improvement in their personal development since the start of the program. Of those eight organizations, three organizations do a pre/post survey process with the students, two organizations evaluate student development through a post survey process, three organizations assess student success through the success of their final projects or competitions, and one organization does a one on one meeting with participants once a week along with an annual interview with the students and their parents to evaluate progress and improvements through the year. The other six organizations interviewed did not have any formal assessment or evaluation of student success as a result of participating in the program.

The process of determining program success was assessed in question four. The range of techniques in measuring program success was extremely diverse, and many organizations used multiple methods in evaluating their success. Four organizations use participant surveys or interviews to gather information from the people who have experienced the curriculum first hand, while two other organizations use surveys or interviews to collect opinions from the participant’s parents and/or teachers. Another four organizations heavily rely on the quantitative data through the number of participants they have in their programs, and the number of people who seem to have a continued interest. Two organizations base much of the programs’ success on the success of their alumni who have completed the programs. These organizations use their alumni’s success as a testimonial for the effectiveness and quality of their programming. Another way that an organization assesses the success of their program is through the opinion and involvement of community sponsors. Lastly, an organization has had empirical research performed to measure the generativity in the students who have completed the program.

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| Table 1  *Responses to Program Questions* | | | | | | | | | |
| Name of Program/ Organization | Sponsor/  Affiliation | Founded | Active Par. | Total Par. | Ages | Definition of leadership | Assessment of youth leadership development | Application | Cost |
| NHRI | UNL | 1949 | 180 | ~6,000 | K-12th grade | Yes | Yes | Nomination | No |
| Y. Lead. Omaha | Creighton | 1992 | 40 | ~480 | H.S. Sophomores | No | No | Yes | No |
| Leadership Lincoln | Non-profit | 1996 | 40-45 | ~855 | H.S. Sophomores | No | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Y. Lead.  Kearney | Chamber of Comm. | 1994 | 25 | 500 | H.S. Juniors | No | No | Yes | No |
| Y. Lead. Tomorrow | Grand Is. Chamber | 1998 | 35 | ~570 | H.S. Seniors | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Nebraska FFA | FFA | 1928 | 7,400 | N.K. | 7th grade – 21 years | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| LAUNCH | Non-profit | 1961 | 1,500 | N.K. | 6th grade – 12th grade | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| YELP | UNL Extension | 2013 | 14 | 25 | H.S. Sophomores | No | Yes | Yes | No |
| Y. Lead. Academy | Fremont Chamber | 2010 | 21 | 120 | H.S. Juniors | No | No | Yes | Yes |
| Nebraska FBLA | FBLA | 1962 | N.K. | N.K. | 6th grade- 12th grade | No | Yes | No | Yes |
| Nothing But Net | Non-profit | 2000 | 800 | N.K. | Pre-K – 8th grade | No | Yes | No | No |
| Rotary Y. Lead. Seminar | Rotary Council | 2011 | 50 | 237 | H.S. Juniors | No | Yes | Nomination | No |
| NE Y. Leadership Council | NE Dept. Vocational Rehab and Special Ed | 2009 | 29 | 70 | Ages 14-24 | No | Yes | Yes | No |
| Project Everlast | Non-profit | 2002 | ~60 | N.K. | Ages 14-24 | No | No | No | No |
| *Note.* N.K. = not known. NHRI = Nebraska Human Resources Institute. YELP = Youth Engaged in Leading Phelps. | | | | | | | | | |

Figure 1. Frequencies techniques used in youth leadership development programming

Annual participant numbers, as well as an estimate of total of participants during the life of the program were provided in question 5. Annual numbers across Nebraska range from 14 to 7,400, whereas total numbers range from 25 to well over 6,000. These total participant numbers appear related to the age of the organization, which was collected with question six.

The age for the target population of each organization was explored through question seven. The target age range for inclusion for this project was 6th through 12th grades; however, some programming targeted additional age groups. The Nebraska Youth Leadership Council and Project Everlast’s programming is offered for ages 14 through 24. Nothing But Net is an organization based out of Omaha that offers it’s programming for youth starting in pre-k until 8th grade, and Nebraska Human Resources Institute (NHRI) includes all grades from kindergarten to 12th grade. Programming through NHRI and Leadership Omaha also consist of significant involvement by college students to catalyze the leadership development of the youth participants.

The interests and programming for each organization calls to different populations among the youth in Nebraska. NHRI is a program that focuses on a student’s leadership potential or interest, and requires a nomination for student participation. Youth Leadership Omaha, Leadership Lincoln, and YELP are all organizations that accept applications for high school sophomores who show potential and interest in leadership development. Youth Leadership Kearney, Youth Leadership Tomorrow, Rotary Youth Leadership Seminar, and Youth Leadership Academy all recruit high school juniors who show leadership potential and interest to apply for their programs. FFA and FBLA are both organizations based in school systems offered to students from 7th grade to 12th grade; FFA is for students who show interest in leadership within the agricultural industry, and FBLA is for students who show interest in leadership in the business world. LAUNCH is also a program that is offered to students who desire leadership development and show interest in leadership within their school and community, and the ages they serve are 6th graders through seniors in high school. The Nebraska Youth Leadership Council targets youth who have experienced a mental disability. To be involved in Project Everlast, youth must have experience in the state’s foster care system. Lastly, Nothing But Net is a program for students in pre-k through 8th grade, but has no standards or expectations on interests, leadership potential, or previous education.

Question eight assessed the cost of participating in leadership development programming. Six out of the fourteen organizations interviewed require a tuition payment directly from the youth participants for their participation in the program; two of those organizations offer scholarships for students who may not be able to pay for their participation. Three organizations do not require students to pay for their own participation directly, however, students must find community sponsors to cover the fees of the programs. The five remaining organizations do not have any costs associated to their programs and do not require students to pay for their participation. These programs find their funds either through government grants, fundraising, or a combination of the two.

As mentioned, the researchers also collected information about the affiliation or sponsor of the programs. Different sponsors include local Chambers of Commerce, national clubs- like FFA and FBLA, local universities, extension offices, Rotary Council, and government agencies (Nebraska Department of Education and Nebraska Department of Vocational Rehab and Special Education). Many youth leadership development organizations in Nebraska are also stand-alone non-profit organizations.

**Discussion**

In this study it is important to note that not all youth leadership development curriculums are the same, and all programs execute leadership development differently because of the diverse perspectives available in the different communities. There appear to be significant efforts throughout the state to actively pursue the development of young leaders.

Before discussing the implications of this study, several limitations are first discussed. Despite every effort to collect data from each youth leadership development program denied in the search process, data was collected from 14 organizations. Furthermore, the search process may have missed programs that do not have a web presence or are relatively new. It is also important to note that programs that involve the development of youth in general may have been relevant to leadership development specifically, but those programs were not included in this study.

Overall, the youth leadership development programs in Nebraska use a variety of educational techniques. All of the programs that were interviewed used numerous methods that would facilitate learning for all types of learning styles. This also shows that multiple opportunities are in place for students to practice, study, and apply lessons learned about leadership in the midst of the programs’ curriculum.

Broadly speaking, another strength in the youth leadership development programming throughout Nebraska is the wide range of interests. For example, specific interests in youth leadership development programming include agriculture, business, civic duty, and peer mentorship. Providing different platforms for leadership through varying interests gives opportunity for youth with different passions to develop their leadership skills and knowledge.

Another area that appears to be a strength in Nebraska youth leadership development programming is the inclusion of many demographics. The leadership organizations that were interviewed were predominantly interested in having diversity among their participants. There are also specific organizations created to target distinct demographics, for example youth who have been in the foster care system, youth with mental and/or physical disabilities, and youth attend inner-city schools. There is no doubt that having an abundance of different organizations and programs for youth leadership development provides opportunities to a wide range of the youth in Nebraska.

Although there are many areas that youth leadership development programming in Nebraska does well, there are areas that could be improved. Apart from one organization interviewed in this study, all other organizations lacked a formal, or official, definition of leadership. Without a clear and foundational understanding of what is being developed, how can expectations and standards be met? Leadership is a versatile and flexible term that has the ability to change according to perspectives, experiences, and education. However, if youth leadership development is a primary goal for these programs, a comprehensible, unambiguous standard should be set with a definition that is understandable for the youth participants. Without this simple measure of expectation, the youth and the programs are robbed of some evidence that there has been successful leadership development among past and present participants.

Another realm of youth leadership development that could be improved is the availability to programs for the youth that reside in rural communities across the state. Many of the programs in rural Nebraska are county based and meet in a venue that is typically not in a central location. This raises the concern that these programs may not actually be available to youth who show potential and desire to grow in their leadership capacity simply because of location. With this information attention should be given to creating a curriculum that may surpass the boundaries of location so that all youth in Nebraska may have the opportunity to be developed into leaders.

Aside from location, there may also be another barrier for youth who desire to grow in their leadership capacities- cost. Although the costs for these youth leadership development programs are relatively inexpensive compared to adult leadership development programs, cost may still be a hurdle that some students may not be able to overcome. Specifically, when programs require some sort of application process, a student who sees cost as an obstacle may not apply regardless of desire and potential to improve themselves as leaders.

The lack of formal assessments for many of the programs is a major opportunity for improvement within youth leadership development programming. Although some organizations conducted assessments of development, 43 percent of the organizations surveyed did not. The development of a widely available, psychometrically sound measure of youth leadership could be a useful tool for many of the programs included in this study. If this sort of measurement were created, organizations that rely on government grants, fundraising, and sponsors would be able to have quantifiable evidence that their programs are worth renewing contracts and continued funding. In addition, if more organizations were able to prove that they are developing young leaders they could seek funding and lower costs of programming. To create such an assessment, there is a desperate need for more research in regard to the effectiveness and efficiency of programming and the impact it may have in the community. There is also a pressing need for research concerning how to measure development in young leaders, because of a significant difference between adult leaders and young leaders.

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