

Getting the Most Out of a Leadership Institute Experience

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Over the course of the next couple of months, thousands of student leaders will participate in and graduate from a leadership institute of some kind, whether it is an organizational specific, campus-based, or interfraternal experience such as the Undergraduate Interfraternity Institute. Each of these students will have an educational experience that is designed to improve their own awareness, skills, and abilities as well as to empower them to positively impact their organizations and communities. In order to maximize the growth, learning, and ultimately the impact of these experiences, students need to be adequately prepared and supported throughout their leadership journey. This piece will focus on what we can learn from Transfer of Training research as well as the steps students can take to be more successful and the opportunities that exist for advising and support.

Over the past 25 years, there has been significant research in the area of Transfer of Training. While much of this may be human resource and job performance related, there are significant parallels to the leadership and student development work that occurs via student leadership development programs. It is clear that the goal of this research is to maximize the potential application of skills and knowledge acquired during a training or learning experience, but studies have shown a significant gap between learning and behavior with only about 20% of the knowledge gained actually being transferred to performance (Grossman & Salas, 2011). This transfer rate indicates the need for intentional, ongoing engagement with students participating in these programs. Thankfully, there are steps that advisors can take to prepare students for their experience as well as to assist students in effectively applying their new knowledge and skills.

Pre-Program

The period of time prior to a student attending a program presents an ideal opportunity to prepare them for their learning experience. While it may be easy and convenient to discuss nuts and bolts, such as the packing list, the quality of the meals and accommodations, the fun that will be had, and the fast friendships that will develop, focusing on that alone will do a disservice to the student and their potential learning experience. This is a critical time to focus on learning expectations, motivations for attending, desired outcomes, and leadership development needs. This is a time to ask students some difficult questions, such as:

- What are the most pressing needs for your organization and the fraternity/sorority community?
- How would you like to address those challenges?
- What is holding your organization and/or community back from achieving its potential?
- What skills do you need to learn to be a more effective leader?

This list can go on and on. Be thoughtful and specific to the needs of each individual student. If the program has suggested or required pre-reading or preparation materials, this is an opportunity to discuss those things. Related to this, be careful to not divulge too much about the process and trajectory of the program, as that may inhibit the student's natural learning process as they navigate the challenges laid out in the program curriculum.

Post-Program

Transfer of Training research has shown that motivation (Baldwin et al., 2009) and self-efficacy (2011) are two of the most significant contributors to the application of new skills and knowledge. These two



factors are intertwined as self-efficacy refers to the judgment an individual makes about their abilities while motivation refers to an individual's energy, urgency, and commitment. Essentially, for effective transfer of training to occur, an individual must believe that change is possible. Both of these factors can be influenced through purposeful coaching and mentoring (there are countless resources that discuss best practices in both mentoring and coaching). For our purposes here, it is critical to note that the best advisors and advocates not only have the ability to successfully mentor students through these learning experiences, but they also understand that it is not necessarily their role to personally mentor and coach each student. They embrace the reality that in many instances their role is to connect students with mentors and coaches that will best serve the learning and situational needs of the student, and sometimes, that person is someone else.

Beyond purposeful mentoring, it is also important for advisors and advocates to role model desired behaviors. We cannot ask students to challenge behaviors, realities, and norms that we are not able to challenge ourselves. Additionally, we can increase both motivation and self-efficacy by doing many of the things that students are encouraged to do as they create action plans. This includes, but is not limited to breaking down larger tasks and ideas into small, manageable steps (small wins), identifying allies and like-minded individuals to assist (building your coalition), and focusing on things that are already successful (finding the bright spots).

Conclusion

The most successful students naturally do many of the things mentioned above. They are motivated and have a high level of self-efficacy. They ask themselves and others the difficult questions. They seek out mentors and coaches to challenge them. They are great to work with because they challenge us to be better. As advocates and advisors, we have an opportunity to help more students reach that end of the continuum through intentional advising and support before and after their own leadership institute experience. Through this process, we are not only helping them to positively impact their community, but we are also helping them to develop the lifelong leadership skills that will serve them well in the years to come.

References

- Baldwin, T., Ford, J., & Blume, B. (2009). Transfer of training 1988-2008; an updated review and agenda for future research. *International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 41-70.
- Grossman, R., & Salas, E. (2011). The transfer of training; what really matters. *International Journal of Training and Development*, 103-120.