Impact of Perceived Student Leadership Role on the Academic Performance of Distant Education Students in Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine the extent to which distant education (DE) student leaders perceive their role and establish whether this has significant correlation with their academic performance. Specifically, the study was interested in the influence that the intervening variables of age, level, employment status, and prior leadership experience have on their perceived leadership role. The role of gender in this direction was also considered. Guiding this study was the servant-leader theoretical framework. According to Greenleaf (2003) students consider the building of trust as the central issue for leadership by means of service. It was in line with this problem that most student leaders profess that they want to serve their fellow students instead of lording it over them. A questionnaire based on student leadership role with a Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .855 was used to collect data. Predictive Analysis Software (PASW) was used to analyze the data. Regression and correlation statistical tools were used to test the hypothesis formulated to guide the study. The results of the study revealed that DE students' perception of their leadership role is high. However, this high perception is neither dependent on background of student leaders nor gender. It also showed that high academic performance is not dependent on perceived student leadership role expectation let alone their duties and responsibilities. However, perceived leadership role expectation was found to be the least potent contributor to academic performance of distant education (DE) student leaders. It is, therefore, recommended that DE students should be elected strictly on merit and not on age, level, employment status, and prior leadership experience. DE student leaders should also be given training in the positions they have been elected for. Finally, DE students leaders should strive to combine their studies with the leadership position they occupy.

Keywords: *Student leadership, academic performance, role expectation, duties and responsibilities.*

INTRODUCTION

The administrative structure in educational institutions makes provision for student leadership. In line with this provision, Students' Representative Councils (SRC) are found in most educational institutions. In most cases, the representatives are elected by the students themselves after school administration nominates candidates for various positions. In other cases, students are allowed to nominate and elect their own leaders. Student leaders exhibit some unique characteristics that endear them to the hearts of their colleagues. They are great orators who sound very convincing. They seem to know all the problems of their colleagues and are quick to promise having antidotes to all such problems. A careful analysis of events however reveals that all the characteristics displayed by most student leaders are just for the purposes of winning their confidence which are expected to be translated into votes for them.

The involvement of school administration in the choice of school prefects stems out of the concern about the calibre of students put in leadership positions. Whilst students insist on electing radical and fearless colleagues who would always champion their course, school administrators advocate for brilliant and moderate student leaders who would not embarrass the school. The policy in the University of Cape Coast is that, to qualify for any leadership position one needs a Cumulative Great Point Average (CGPA) of at least 2.5 or better.

The Centre for Continuing Education (CCE), University of Cape Coast (UCC), has helped her students to form the Distance Education Students' Association of Ghana (DESAG). The constitution of the association was modelled on the philosophy behind the Student's Representative Council (SRC) of UCC. Leaders of distant education students have been elected at all the forty eight study centres and every year, these leaders meet in congress to elect their national executives. While some people argue that active participation in student leadership is waste of time, others see it as training grounds for future leaders. In Ghana, there is ample evidence to show that many of the political leaders we have had since independence were student leaders who graduated from SRCs through to National Union of Ghana Students (NUGS) from the various university campuses. The case of distant leaders is even more serious, because all of them are full time workers who gamble with time in order to study and at the same time perform their duties as committed student leaders. While some students shy away from leadership positions, others do everything within their power to assume positions of leadership irrespective of their capabilities and competency levels. The challenges that confront DE students especially with time constrains puts many potential leaders off even if colleagues persuade them to take up such positions. Some student leaders, who are not able to perform very well academically, are quick to accuse school authorities of victimization. On the other hand, some student leaders are always seen performing their leadership duties and yet end up with very good grades. One, therefore, wonders if the performance of leadership duties impacts distant students' academic performance.

Student leaders are generally expected to compliment the efforts of faculty in the effective running of their institutions. They also serve as the mouthpiece of students in the promotion of cordial relationship between students and faculty. Research has provided sufficient information about the key characteristics of student leaders. However, there is a growing need for continued improvement and reflective practice on the continuous development of leadership skills. It has been observed that much time is expended by student leaders in the performance of their role to the detriment of their academic work. Since its inception, no research have been conducted to assess the activities of the Distant Education Students Association of Ghana (DESAG). The purpose of this study, therefore, is to determine the extent to which distant student leaders perceive their duties and establish whether this has significant correlation with their academic performance. Specifically, the study is interested in the influence the intervening variables of age, level, employment status, size of study centre, and prior leadership experience have on their perceived leadership role.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

The field of educational leadership is washed with many concepts. Leithwood and Duke (1999) identified instructional leadership, transformational leadership, contingent leadership, moral leadership, managerial leadership, and participative leadership as being the six frequently used concepts with different meanings. Similarly, there are as many theories regarding leadership as there are definitions. Rubenstein (2005) identified eight of them after examining the work of Peter Northouse in 2004. They are: situational approach, contingency theory, path-goal theory (also known as the motivational theory), the leader-member exchange theory, transformational leadership, team leadership, leader of leaders approach, and value-based leadership.

For this study, the focus is on Greenleaf's (2003) servant-leader theory. The theory says that "students consider the building of trust as the central issue for leadership by means of service" (Greenleaf, 2003, p. 36). Servant leadership (Biblical leadership) says "man is here for the sake of other men" (Albert Einstein). The leader and every other individual is here to serve the rest. The theory begins with the natural feeling one has to serve. One therefore, consciously decides to aspire to lead. This brings to mind the hierarchical principle of organizational leadership which Greenleaf reports began with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law. Greenleaf noted that this hierarchical system "still dominates everything that is organized – armies, churches, governments, universities, businesses" (p. 43). He asserted further that this is still the environment that today's college students will find themselves in as they move from being a student to citizen. According to Greenleaf, the success of a servant-leader depends on a number of attributes. They include: individual initiative and goal setting; trust; acceptance and empathy for their followers; art of intuition; ability to move forward and make decisions without all of the information; ability to bridge the gap between what is known and what is needed; foresight or the ability to predict future patterns, ability to meet the stress of life; be persuasive and able to get things done (Greenleaf, 2003).

Beaudoin (2002) argued for research and examination of the specific type of leadership needed in distance education leadership. He stated that "a reasonable amount of attention has been given to the planning and administration of distance education for quite some time." (p. 138). Beaudoin (2002) went on, however, to state that this might be considered adequate enough without discussing the more esoteric domain of leadership (p.138). According to Case and Scanlan (2001), there are specific attributes of administrators in a university in relation to distance education. Dede (1993) also strongly supported the idea that leadership in distance education is different from traditional education leadership. Care and Scanlan (2001) added their voice by saying, "there is a general lack of understanding regarding the experiences of administrators, faculty, and staff from other departments in the development of distant education courses." (p. 140). However, the distance education leader also needs, according to Beaudoin (2002), to be a situational leader, one who can diagnose the organization at a specific moment and determine the readiness of the organization or its stakeholders for change.

Students are very important when we talk about stakeholders in distant education. As stakeholders, students need to be involved in the administration and smooth management of distant education programmes. Astin (1985) stated that the more students are involved in student activities, including leadership activities, the greater their success in learning and personal development will be. On student leadership position and academic performance, Cress et al. (2001) concluded that all students have leadership potential and that institutions of higher education can uncover and develop this potential with targeted programs that will also increase the student's educational success. They also asserted that educational institutions will be successful in developing tomorrow's leaders when they provide connections between academic programs and community activities and express a strong desire, through their stated mission, to create a "legacy of leaders in businesses, organizations, governments, schools, and neighborhoods" (p. 23).

Wielkiewicz (2000) agreed with Posner that college students are important participants in leadership development because it is college students who will be in future leadership roles or opportunities, and how they learn to practice leadership will steer the course of future societal development. Hence, Allen et al. (1998) have a keen interest in seeing that students develop a systemic approach to leadership instead of a hierarchal approach. Astin (1993) also cited research that links student educational attainment to involvement in leadership activities, and stresses the importance of developing the leadership ability of students during their college years. Boatman (1999) stated that student leadership development would be more effective if it were approached from a relational viewpoint instead of through formal courses or degrees.

According to the Enrolment Management & Student Affairs unit of University Pointe (2012), student leaders are looked to as model students at Portland State. As such, it is important that student leaders exemplify a balance between academics and leadership. As citizens who are or are going to be leaders in the community, it is important to be prepared academically. Being a model student leader, one requires over a 3.5 GPA to be considered for the position.

Research has shown that participation in student organizations and other co-curricular activities on campus can help students stay engaged with school, get good grades, and graduate. However, students often have many competing obligations (family, work, student leadership, health) which cause academic performance to suffer. Student leadership is important, but we need to emphasize that you must be a student first. Letting academics suffer at the expense of student leadership responsibilities is counter-productive.

A study carried out by the Office of Institutional Research (2011) demonstrated that serving as a club leader, no matter how many terms served, had lasting impact and was a positive contributing factor in relation to student academic performance, especially with regard to facilitating graduation. This study revealed that remedial students who served as club leaders outperformed non-club leader remedial students in terms of retention rate, GPA and Good Standing rate at the second year. Remedial student club leaders continued to maintain a significantly higher 3-year retention rate than non-club leader remedial students while maintaining levels of GPA and Good Standing that were similar to that of non-club leader remedial students at the third year.

In summary, the question of what a distance education leader is, their characteristics, requirements, and the actions of an effective distance education leader still have not been adequately addressed by research. There is still a long way to go before an adequate definition of these aspects of an effective distance education leader will be reached. It is hoped, through this study, to bring the insights of various researchers together into one place to help future distant education leaders to best fulfil the still unstated requirements of their positions.

Statement of The Problem

Many studies have been carried out on the management of distance education. The International Centre for Distance Learning (ICDL), Distance Education Library (DEL) and the Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) alone contain hundreds of such papers. Most of these studies, however, focussed only on distant education policy, institution management, student support systems and student administration. Surprisingly, only a few studies have been carried out on the academic management and administration of distant education delivery. The role of student leaders in distant education is an area not researched much.

To be a leader, one needs to be convinced about the characteristics and attributes one possesses. Some people take leadership positions without knowing what is expected of them. Such people lord it over their colleagues and most often abuse their positions for personal gains. There are widespread allegations of misapplication and embezzlement of funds levelled against student leaders. There is also the argument that leaders are born and not made. Some others however say the reverse is true. For a DE student to be effective, he/she should be aware of his/her roles. It is, therefore, important to find out what DE student leaders perceive their roles to be in relation to their age, level, employment status, and prior leadership experience. Equally important is the need to find out the impact that student leadership characteristics, role expectations, duties and responsibilities have on their academic performance.

Research Question

This study addressed one major question; that is: How do DE student leaders perceive their leadership role?

Research Hypotheses

The following research hypotheses were formulated and tested:

1. There is a statistically significant relationship between DE student leader's background and their perception of leadership role.

2. Gender plays a role in DESAG leadership role perception.

3. There is a statistically significant relationship between each of the independent variables (characteristics, role expectations, and duties and responsibilities) and academic performance.

4. The independent variables have a statistically significant effect on academic performance of DE students.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Descriptive survey design was used for the study. CCE has a student population of about 25,000 spread in 47 study centres in Ghana. The total number of DESAG leaders is 375 across the country. Purposive and quota sampling techniques were used to select 91 respondents to reflect DESAG leaders in all the 10 regions. A questionnaire originally designed by Wielkiewicz (2000) for evaluating college students' thinking about leadership and organizations was adopted and modified to reflect issues bothering on students' leadership in distant education and used to collect data for the study. The variables covered were: characteristics of student leaders, role expectation, duties and responsibilities. The instrument had Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient of .855. Respondents also indicated their best and worst grades since they started the programme. Predictive Analysis Software (PASW) version 18 was used to analyse the data. Correlation and regression were used to establish relationship and predict DE student leader's perception of leadership role and their academic performance respectively.

RESULTS

The main research question posed for this study was how do DE student leaders perceive their leadership role?

Table 1: Final rating of DE student's perception of their leadership roles

Sn	Aspect of leadership role	Very high	High	Low	Very Low	M	S D	Rank
1	Leadership Charac.	45 (49.5%)	43 (47.3%)	3 (3.3%)	-	3.46	.563	1st
2	Leadership Role expec.	-	40 (44.0%)	39 (42.9%)	12 (13.2%)	2.69	.694	3rd
3	Leadership duties & res	1(1.1%)	30 (33.0%)	49 (53.8%)	11 (12.1%)	2.76	..667	2nd
4	Total leadership role	10 (11.0%)	77 (84.6%)	4 (4.4%)	-			

The analysis presented in Table 1 reveals that 45 (49.5%) and 43 (47.3%) respondents perceived their leadership characteristics to be very high and high respectively. Table 1 further shows an almost split perception of leadership duties and responsibilities. While 31 (34.1%) respondents rated their perception of leadership duties and responsibilities to be positive, the rest 60 (65.9%) perceived them to be negative. Forty (44.0%) respondents perceived their student leadership role expectation to be high, while the rest 51 (56.1%) thought otherwise. On the whole however, 10 (11.0%) and 77 (84.6%) respondents rated their perception of student leadership role to be very high and high respectively. Only 4 (4.4%) respondents perceived their role to be low. Finally, the analysis revealed that DE student leaders ranked their perception of leadership characteristics first and their duties and responsibilities second. Leadership role expectation was the least aspect of leadership role perceived by DE student leaders.

Hypothesis 1

There is a statistically significant relationship between DE student leader's background and their perception of leadership role.

To measure the degree of relationship between DE student leader's background and their perception of leadership role, Pearson's correlation was used to statistically test to find out whether background of student leaders influenced their perception of leadership roles.   Table 2 gives a summary of the test.

Table 2: Correlation Values of Background Information of DE Student Leaders with Their Perception of Leadership Role

Sn	Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Age	1.000						
2	Level	.437**	1.000					
3	Employment Status	- .203	.074	1.000				
4	Prior leadership experience.	-.342**	-.861**	-.139	1.000			
5	Leadership characteristics.	.079	-.096	-.152	.092	1.000		
6	Expectation	-.106	.070	.021	.028	-.059	1.000	
7	Duties and Resp.	-.109	.105	-.150	.013	-.039	.540	1.000

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

The analysis shown in Table 2 reveals that DE student leaders employment status correlated negatively with leadership characteristics ($r = - .152$; $p<0.05$) and duties and responsibilities ($r = - .150$; $p<0.05$). In the same vein, age of DE student leaders correlated negatively with leadership role expectation ($r = - .106$; $p<0.05$) and duties and responsibilities ($r = - .109$; $p<0.05$). The negative relationship connotes that DE student's perception of their leadership position is not dependent on their background. The null hypothesis is therefore accepted.

Hypothesis 2

Gender plays a role in DESAG leadership role perception.

Table 3: Means, Standard Deviation, and Intercorrelation for Gender and Perception of DE Leadership Roles (N = 91)

Variable	M	SD	Gender	Characteristics	Role Exp.	Duties & Resp.
				Intercorrelations		
Gender	1.27	.44	--	-.199	-.154	-.194
Leadership Characteristics	3.46	.56	-.199	--	-.059	-.039 .540**
Role Expectation	2.69	.69	-.154	-.059	--	--
Duties & Resp.	2.76	.66	-.194	-.039	.540**	

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

**Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (1-tailed)

Table 3 shows that only role expectation correlated positively with duties and responsibilities (r = .540; p<0.01), though the relationship is only medium. This is because, going by Nwana's (1992) guidelines for interpreting correlation coefficient, the value .540 falls within 0.40 and 0.60 which is interpreted as medium. The rest of the predictors showed negative correlation with gender. This indicates that the combination of all the DE students perception of their leadership roles do not significantly correlate with respondents' gender. The research hypothesis that gender plays a role in DESAG leadership role perception is rejected.

Hypothesis 3

There is a statistically significant relationship between each of the independent variables (characteristics, role expectations, and duties and responsibilities) and academic performance

Table 4: Inter-correlation matrix table of relationship between Academic Performance and Perception of DE   Student Leadership Roles

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4
Academic performance	2.08	.53	1.000			
Characteristics	3.46	.56	.086	1.000		
Role Expectation	2.69	.69	.014	-.059	1.000	
Duties & Responsibilities	2.77	.67	-.036	-.039	.540**	1.000

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

*Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed)

The analysis in Table 4 shows that DE student leadership role expectation was significantly associated with their duties and responsibilities, (r=.540; P<0.01). On the contrary, academic performance correlated negatively with DE leadership duties and responsibilities (r=-.036; P<0.01). In the same vein, DE student leadership characteristics correlated negatively with role expectation (r= -.059; P<0.01) and duties and responsibilities (r = -.039; P<0.05). This negative relationship implies that high academic performance is not dependent on DE student's role expectation let alone their duties and responsibilities. The findings of this study therefore failed to accept the hypothesis that there is a statistically significant relationship between each of the independent variables (characteristics, role expectations, and duties and responsibilities) and academic performance.

Hypothesis 4

The independent variables have a statistically significant effect on academic performance of DE students.

Table 5: Summary of Multiple Regression Analysis of the relationship between Perception of Student Leadership Role and Academic Performance

Multiple R	.102a				
R 2	.010				
Adjusted R 2	-.024				
Standard Error	.536				
F	.303				
Variables	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	1.834	.448		4.088	.000
Characteristics	.081	.100	.086	.809	.420
Role expectation	.040	.097	.052	.409	.683
Duties & Responsibilities	-.048	.101	-.061	-.481	.632

a. Predictors: (Constant), Characteristics, role expectation, duties & responsibilities
b. Dependent Variable: Academic performance

The analysis in Table 5 reveals that 10.0 percent of variance in perception of DE student leadership role is accounted for by joint contribution of leadership factors. This implies that other factors other than the ones used in this study accounted for 90.0 percent of the variation in leadership role performance. Table 5 further reveals that F calculated value .303 is greater than F at 0.05 level of significance. This means that student leadership factors did not significantly contribute to their academic performance. The three types of leadership attributes (characteristics, role expectation, and duties and responsibilities) did not have any joint prediction on academic performance (R^2 = .010; F (3, 90) = .303; P > .05). The breakdown of the assessment showed that the three types of leadership attributes had joint influence of 0.10 percent on academic performance. Individually, leadership characteristics had no significant effect on academic performance (β = .086; t = .809; P > .05). Role expectation had no significant effect on academic performance (β = .052; t = .409; P > .05). Lastly, duties and responsibilities had no significant effect on academic performance (β = .061; t = .481; P > .05)

DISCUSSIONS

This study has shown that DE student leaders rate their perception of leadership role high. However, this high perception is not dependent on background characteristics such as age, level, employment status, and prior leadership experience. This finding is quite interesting because it is generally accepted that age brings a lot to bear on leadership. Similarly, the number of years one spent on the programme was expected to give the DE student some level of experience in terms of how to handle issues as they arise. Time management is another crucial area when it comes to leadership role performance. The demands of one's job are considered to impact on the discharge of leadership roles. It is also said that experience is the best teacher. It is, therefore, asserted that those who have ever been student leaders before would bring that experience to bear on the performance of their leadership role. The reverse is true in this study and it also contradicts Beaudoin (2002) assertion that Information Technology (IT) leadership requires many of the characteristics common to all leaders. We agree with the assertion that there are certain common characteristics that every leader is supposed to have. In an earlier study, Hutchison (1988) noted that the degree of one's background in leadership role is directly related to the acquisition and development of skills critical to effective school leadership. This means that the common characteristics notwithstanding, to be an effective school leader, one needs some specific skills that would be relevant in the school environment.

The findings of this study also portrayed that gender plays no role in the perception of DE student leadership role. In Ghana, only few female students put themselves up for election into DE student leadership positions and therefore dare rub shoulders with their male counterparts. This finding confirms Bardou, et al (2003) study which stated that men and women did not significantly differ on their self-efficacy for leadership. On the other hand, the findings on gender runs contrary to Mayo and Christenfeld (1999) study which found that women tend to have lower self-efficacy than men in their ability to perform specific leadership tasks. From our discussions sofar, it is clear that the debate on gender disparity and mainstreaming is still inconclusive. More females need to be given the opportunity to take up leadership positions while still students, because it would surely provide them the necessary exposure for greater opportunities in real life situations in the society in which they will find themselves after school.

It was further established by this study that there is no statistically significant relationship between perceived DE student leadership role and academic performance. This result contravenes the findings of Leithwood et al (2004) which indicated that evidence exists to the effect that there is small but significant effect of leadership actions on student learning across the spectrum of schools. Competent student leaders strive to keep their heads above water because they feel it is very embarrassing for them to be writing referral papers with colleagues who hold them in high esteem. The embarrassment is as a result of the leadership position they occupy since it commands a lot of respect. In another study, Waters, Marzanno, and McNulty (2003) reported that leadership behaviours significantly correlated with student achievement. It is, therefore important that DE student leaders do everything within their means to perform creditably in their academic endeavours.

CONCLUSIONS

The results of the study revealed that DE students' perception of their leadership role is high. This high perception however has no relationship with age, level, employment status, prior leadership experience or gender. It is also concluded that high academic performance is not dependent on perceived student leadership characteristics, role expectations, and duties and responsibilities. However, perceived leadership role expectation was found to be the least potent contributor to academic performance of distant education (DE) students.

Recommendations

The results obtained from this study provide sufficient grounds to recommend that DE students should be elected strictly on merit and not on background characteristics such as age, level, employment status, and prior leadership experience . Student leaders should show genuine commitment in the discharge of their duties. Female DE students should be encouraged to take up leadership positions in order to prepare them for the future. DE student leaders should also be given training in the positions they have been elected for. Finally, DE students should strive to manage their time very well in order to combine their studies with the position they occupy as leaders.

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