

# Key Experiences from an Agricultural Leadership Academy

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## Abstract

This case study focused on the Litton Leadership Scholars program, which is a year-long undergraduate agricultural leadership academy and asked the central question of what made the leadership academy experience impactful. Five themes emerged as central to the study: 1) Participants personally admired and felt connected with Jerry Litton and the Litton family, which provided a context for understanding leadership theory; 2) Participants described the sense of community in the academy as valuable, allowing them to express ideas more freely and enhanced the learning environment; 3) Structure of the program allowed for a multitude of networking opportunities, between students, faculty, mentors, and business professionals; 4) Participants noted the year-long length of the program was beneficial by allowing time for reflection on personal growth and permitted them a chance to apply their leadership skills while still in the learning environment; and 5) Participants did not apply to the program out of impulse, there was a specific reason they applied, which included being personally encouraged to apply or knowing of Jerry Litton. Recommendations for practice include providing a context for leadership education, developing a feeling of community, capitalizing upon networking, and providing time for reflection on personal growth and application of skills.

## Introduction

People have yearned for impactful leaders and a greater understanding of leadership for years. Hence, higher education is entrusted with a growing role in molding the quality of leadership in society (Astin et al., 2000). Universities and colleges across the United States are not only educating the next generation of leaders in agriculture, business, government, medicine,

and law but for local communities, schools, churches, and families. Leadership is not for just a few elite men and women but rather a process that people use in bringing about the best from themselves and others (Kouzes and Posner, 1995). The number of leaders that are needed in all segments of society is great.

The teaching of leadership on college campuses has increased over the years (Fritz et al., 2003; Riggio et al., 2003; Schwartz et al., 1998). Leadership development has undoubtedly become an important outcome of an undergraduate education (Eich, 2008). College and university campuses across the nation are providing formal opportunities to develop students' leadership abilities (Gardener, 1995; Cress et al., 2000). Many of those opportunities are deemed impactful (Rosch and Caza, 2012); however, researchers have noted the need for scientific evaluation of leadership education programs to stay rigorous and academically relevant (Braun et al., 2009). Therefore, this case study sought to explore the nature and impact of the Litton Leadership Scholars program at the University of Missouri.

The Litton Leadership Scholars program is a year-long leadership academy for sophomores in the College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources (CAFNR). Approximately 20 students are selected each year through an application and interview process to be part of an annual cohort. The program was developed in 2012 in conjunction with the Jerry Litton Family Memorial Foundation. Jerry Litton was a politician and agribusiness man with strong ties to agriculture, FFA, and the University of Missouri. Tragically in 1976, Litton, his wife, and two young children were killed in a plane crash. To continue the legacy of the family and aid in the development of agricultural leaders, the Jerry Litton Family Memorial Foundation created an endowment at the University of Missouri to fund several

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initiatives, including the Litton Leadership Scholars. The program provides leadership education through a three-credit hour (one credit in the fall and two credits in the spring) seminar style course which meets once a week. The course is centered around 13 leadership constructs: understanding leadership, awareness of self, practices ethical behavior, sustains leadership, values diversity, enhances communication skills, manages conflict, develops teams, leads change, manages projects, practices citizenship, understands community complexity, and committed to serving others. During the year the students engage in academic and agricultural field based mentorships along with utilizing literature that includes the Jerry Litton – A Biography (Mitchell, 1978), The Student Leadership Challenge (Kouzes and Posner, 2014), Emotionally Intelligent Leadership (Shankman et al., 2015), and The New York Times. All learning experiences focus on developing leaders for impactful change.

### Framework

Astin's theory of student involvement was utilized as a framework (1984). Astin postulated the amount of student learning and development is directly proportional to the involvement in an academic environment. Astin (1984) defines involvement as the amount of physical and psychological energy a student puts forth towards an experience. As administrators and faculty, it is key to regard students' time and energy as finite. To best capitalize upon the limited time and energy, one must attempt to fully engage and involve students in the learning experience. This may include increased interaction with faculty, peer groups, and finding a variety of methods to stimulate student interest. Thus, as involvement increases so do potential academic outcomes.

### Methods

This case study explored the central question of what made the leadership academy experience impactful. This project was granted exempt status by University of Missouri's IRB office. A purposive convenience sample was utilized to achieve maximum sample variation (Creswell, 2013). Eight potential participants were contacted via email inviting them to be a part of the study. Those who agreed to participate (one student declined) were then asked to schedule an interview (Table 1). The participant group included one or more individuals from each of the Litton Leadership Scholars cohorts and represented a wide variety of majors within the CAFNR (Table 1). Pseudonyms were created for all participants to preserve their anonymity throughout the case study. Seven semi-structured interviews were conducted (Table 2), each one lasting approximately 45 minutes. Interviews served as the primary source of data with document analysis of course syllabi and coursework serving as secondary sources. Data triangulation, peer debrief, and member checking were utilized to ensure trustworthiness of the findings (Stake, 1995).

## Findings

The interviews yielded five themes regarding participants' experiences in the Litton Leadership Scholars program. Three of the themes have relational underpinnings and two have programmatic emphasis.

### Theme 1: Personal Admiration and Connection to Jerry Litton and the Litton Family

All participants stated they felt admiration for and personally connected to Jerry Litton and his family story, which enhanced the educational experience. Litton embodied all 13 leadership constructs discussed in the academy. Being able to personally identify with an individual helped increase the students' ability to understand leadership within a context. Litton often discussed his 10 commandments of leadership in speeches (Mitchell, 1978) and the students were tasked with developing their own code for impactful living based off the readings in class and their personal perspectives. Bea said, *"I think back to my 10 commandments of leadership all the time . . . It drives a lot of my decisions, like even if I need that pair of shoes."* The context of Litton's leadership, especially in the agricultural field, was important for participants. Peter stated, *"I think of him as a role model."* Alex reflected on how Litton showed leadership in a variety of settings, *"you have to take on leadership roles, especially even if it's not glamorous, there's not tons of benefits for you. If you care about an organization or a cause, you would have to go for that role."* Anna said, *"I think of him as a role model when it comes to the Ag Industry. . . I see how respected he was [in agriculture] and that is something I want."* Maddie said, *"Jerry Litton was such a big voice for the agricultural community, I've definitely been inspired."* The personal connection to Litton and the family story allowed students to engage with the academic content and explore leadership in relatable context.

**Table 1. Participant Summary**

Participant	Major	Cohort Year
Alex	Animal Sciences	2014-2015
Anna	Agricultural Education and Leadership	2013-2014
Bea	Plant Sciences	2012-2013
Bill	Plant Sciences	2014-2015
Kate	Agribusiness Management	2013-2014
Maddie	Science and Agricultural Journalism	2012-2013
Peter	Agribusiness Management	2014-2015

**Table 2. Interview Protocol**

What made you decide to apply for the Litton Leadership Scholars program?
Can you describe your Litton experience?
What was the most beneficial part of the Litton experience?
To you, what does it mean to be a Litton scholar?
Do you feel like you have grown, as a leader, from your Litton experience? How?
Do you feel like you have grown, as a person, from your Litton experience? How?
What would you tell someone who was interested in applying to the Litton program?
Which of the five leadership behaviors was most impactful to you? Which one challenged you the most?
How would you describe the sense of community you did (or did not feel) during the Litton cohort?
How do you anticipate using the knowledge/skills/behaviors gained from Litton in the future?

**Theme 2: Academic and Personal Connections within the Cohort**

The participants stated they felt a strong sense of community with each other. They may have known one another beforehand, but the academy offered a chance to enhance those personal and professional relationships. The sense of community allowed students to more easily express and share personal experiences and opinions comfortably, which in turn enhanced the learning environment. Maddie shared, *"I was definitely able to do more because I felt like I was able to be more open."* Anna stated how the connections worked outside of the classroom and fostered quality discussions, *"We carpooled to all the events. We talked about things. We worked on homework together. We talked about leadership stuff. We were very open in class."* Kate described the positive classroom atmosphere created by the sense of community, *"Synergy would be a good description of it when everyone was in the classroom being able to feed off each other when we were discussing things."* The participants discussed how much easier it was to approach and discuss (sometimes) deeply personal viewpoints because they felt comfortable and connected with their classmates. They also described maintaining those connections well after the program had ended. Maddie said, *"Facebook is the way we keep in touch . . . I know if I ever need anything personally or [professionally], they will help me out."* The participants described cultivating deeper friendships and career contacts within the cohort. Those connections enhanced the learning environment.

**Theme 3: Networking**

The structure of the academy allowed for a multitude of networking opportunities for the students. Networking included interactions between students, faculty, mentors, and business professionals from the agriculture industry. Examples of interactions included dialogues with top executives from the agricultural industry, university administrators, and a nationally recognized expert in mentorship. Along with the dialogue's students were tasked with shadowing a leader as part of the Litton experience. Alex said, *"when we had speakers come in or whenever we were able to interact at an event with [foundation], to me, that was really beneficial."* Bea noted one of the most beneficial parts of the program *"was just making those personal connections [with people in industry]."* The Litton name can also help students' network within the business world as Bea found out. *"It can be difficult to get in [a shadow program] but when you say 'the Litton Program' doors open that normally won't."* Anna, who shadowed a university administrator as part of the Litton program, valued her interaction and networking experience. She said, *"I felt like I could really relate to [her] . . . it was really cool to see her leadership in context and how her team really respected her and responded well to her."* The participants recognized and valued the chance to network within the agriculture industry and university system. They valued the importance of those connections for their future careers.

**Theme 4: Length of the Program**

The academy is a year-long program, and the length was identified as a strength. It allowed participants time to reflect on personal growth and apply leadership skills and techniques they had discussed. Bill stated, *"you can kind of see how you progress over the course of a year better than you do over a semester. . . and being able to apply what you learn throughout the year really helps."* Some leadership programs are only a day or a few weeks in length. While those have been effective in producing positive change (Rosch and Caza, 2012), the longer length of this program was identified as very beneficial. It gave the participants a chance to dig deeper into the leadership concepts, gain more exposure to the topics, opportunities to practice skills, and time to reflect. A concerted effort is included within the coursework to provide time for reflection and debriefing of the experiences. The length of the program and focused energy investment by the students supports Astin's theory (1984) that the educational outcomes are enhanced. Additionally, several participants described still engaging with the new cohorts of Litton Leadership Scholars. Anna said, *"I like going back to the fall banquet. It is fun to see the new class and get to know them."* The structure of the program, the year-long length and the invitation for continual engagement, was beneficial and enjoyable for the participants.

**Theme 5: Reason for Applying**

The final theme is programmatic from an implementation standpoint. Participants shared the experience started before they applied to the academy. All the participants noted one of two specific reasons for applying to the leadership academy. They were personally aware of who Jerry Litton was and wanted to be involved in the program, or they were specifically recruited by someone who had connections to the program. Bill noted, *"I knew what [Litton] stood for and thought it would be a good idea for me to apply."* While several others stated they were actively recruited by friends as Kate pointed out, *"I became friends with some people who had been in it before or were currently in it, and they talked about it, and really encouraged me to apply. I considered it a little more and thought why not?"* Traditional methods of advertising (flyers, emails, etc.) were not what drew the participants to the program. Personal connections were the reason they became involved. Seeing how others benefitted and grew from the program served as motivation to apply.

**Discussion**

Overall, the participants stated the Litton Leadership Scholars program experience was positive and impactful. The uniqueness of the academy, which focused on an individual (along with associated family members), was cited as beneficial by the participants. The personal connection to Litton allowed for students to contextualize leadership in real world settings and become inspired to

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serve as leaders in their communities and organizations. During the course the participants read Jerry Litton – A Biography (Mitchell, 1978) and met twice with the Jerry Litton Family Memorial Foundation. By discussing the Litton story and meeting individuals from the Foundation that knew the Litton's, the participants felt connected to him and could identify with him and his family in many ways. Those connections served to stimulate interest in the topic of leadership and provide vigilance, which supports Astin's (1984) postulate, to help students engage in learning.

Participants found having close personal connections with members of the cohort enhanced the learning environment. Throughout the year the students work together in class and learn about each other's strengths and weaknesses. When learning about mentorship the students discuss being mentored by an expert, mentoring others when you are the expert, and being peer mentors in a similar stage of development. The thought of being peer mentors in the journey together fosters an environment where participants share more freely in the academy. Having increased interaction among peer groups is important to help increase students' involvement in the learning environment (Astin, 1984). Furthermore, several participants also stated their connections with their classmates continued outside the scope of the academy. They get to know each other professionally and personally. Many keep in touch with friends they made during the Litton Leadership Scholars program and view it as a community.

The Litton Leadership scholars have many opportunities to network with a variety of professionals in the agriculture industry, which the participants found very useful. They often cited connections with business contacts as a potential career benefit. Additionally, participants noted the deep personal connection they felt with the Jerry Litton Family Memorial Foundation Board members as a positive and important relationship. The theory of student involvement focuses on the importance of faculty interaction (Astin, 1985); it can be argued that interaction with the Foundation members and industry professionals fulfills a similar need. The industry experts have important knowledge and skills to transfer to the students. As the networking took place throughout the year the more motivated the students became to be active in the learning experiences as they perceived value in the interactions and increasingly invested more physical and psychological energy.

The year-long length of the academy was deemed as beneficial by all the participants interviewed. The additional time allowed for them to reflect on leadership growth was valued. The program's duration required participants to allocate a larger amount of time and energy to the topics. According to Astin (1985), the amount of energy invested in a topic can lead to a more rewarding experience. Due to the extended experience, participants felt they were better able to immediately apply leadership skills and strategies to a variety of settings.

Finally, application to the program was due to personal connections. Several participants stated they knew who Litton was and decided to apply based on his legacy. The rest were encouraged, or in a few cases actively recruited, to apply for the program. Traditional marketing was not influential according to the participants. Having an outside voice promoting the program made a difference in students' interest in becoming part of the academy.

Though the findings of this case study are not generalizable, there are several recommendations for practice that can be applied to other types of leadership academies. A recommendation for practice includes providing a relatable context for leadership education. At times leadership can be a very nebulous topic but by providing a real and relatable context to students allows for educational growth to occur. Developing a sense of community in the academy is essential. The sense of community within a cohort should include trust and an understanding that all students are growing in their leadership abilities. Capitalizing upon expert and industry networking aids in an academy's perceived value to the students. This provides opportunity for the students and awareness to others about the leadership education that is taking place within the academy. During the learning experiences, time for reflection on personal growth and application of skills should be included. Number of activities may not always be the best measure of impact but rather the depth of the education taking place. Finally, use previous program participants as an active recruiting tool for an academy to continue program momentum. This will aid in building the support network and toward longevity of the program.

While the findings are specific to the Litton Leadership Scholars program, further research should be conducted on other year-long leadership academies to determine if those participants have similar experiences. Additionally, research on short range (e.g. day/week long) leadership programs should be conducted to determine how those programs could be altered to maximize impact based on some of the experiences described in this study. Finally, follow up research should be done with completers of the Litton Leadership Scholars program several years after graduation to see if/how the experience impacted them in their career and civic leadership endeavors.

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