
A formative evaluation of the program for student representatives in a university discipline panel

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Abstract

The university employs a representation of different sectors in the academic community when dealing with major student conduct violations. Among them is the representative of the students. At the time of the study, the student representatives were qualified students who were recruited and trained to become part of the university discipline case conference panel. Upon successful completion of the training, these students were appointed to be members of a program for the pool of student representatives who sit as part of the university adjudicating body, which makes decisions for the university student discipline cases. Terminally, the researcher wanted to improve the engagement and retention of these trained students in the program. Thus, the purpose of conducting this study was to explore the experiences of the students in handling their first case of student conduct violation as part of the university discipline panel. This utilized qualitative methodology in conducting a formative evaluation of the program. Students were asked to submit written reflections on the first student conduct case that they handled. Of the 19 student representatives, eight participated in this study. Line-by-line analysis was done to develop the themes. The findings of this study were four themes that surfaced from the students' experiences: competence, decision-making, vicarious learning, and emotions. This study supports previous research on the importance of supportive adult relationships, which positively impact young people's engagement, as well as the involvement of students in the disciplinary process.

Introduction

The university employs a representation of different sectors in the academic community when dealing with major student conduct violations. Among them is the representative of the students. At the time of the study, the student representatives were qualified students who were recruited and trained to become part of the university discipline case conference panel. Upon successful completion of the training, which is a combination of conceptual and simulation exercises, these students were appointed to be members of a program for the pool of student representatives who sit as part of the university adjudicating body, which makes decisions for the university student disciplinary cases. Upon appointment, the

student representatives become qualified to sit as a member of the university discipline panel and are assigned their first disciplinary case.

Terminally, the researcher wanted to improve the engagement of the student representatives in the program as well as the retention rates of these trained students. These students attended a series of training for the program, and the researcher felt it apt to look into how the program affects the students through the unique experiences the program provides. Thus, the purpose of conducting this study was to explore the experiences of the students in handling their first case of student conduct violation as part of the university discipline panel.

As a program implemented in the university, drawn from the lens of student development theory, this endeavor aimed to enhance the development of student representatives who make decisions in the boardroom, the researcher deemed it wise to gather the individual experiences of students to understand from their perspective how they perceive the experience of being part of a university body that makes decisions on the behavior of their fellow students. King and Howard-Hamilton (2000) also stress the importance of gathering such information to help the university guide the development of students and improve the quality of its programs and services.

In creating a development program for major discipline case student representatives, Stimpson and Stimpson (2008) records that the development of a program in the conduct process may be the responsibility of the one in charge of it but that those with a role in the process should be included (Cordner & Brooks, 1987); espouses different methods to educate them which includes “lectures, experiential activities, observations and mock hearings”; and advocates continuing the training throughout the year. Learning and development for students already involved in the conduct process still have to continue. The actual exposure to the hearings and proceedings requires specially developed critical thinking skills. The inclusion of students in the student disciplinary process has potential benefits for the development of students as well as in the conduct of student discipline on campus. Authors urge universities and colleges to rethink student discipline approaches by integrating the academic and non-academic facets of student development. The good news about this integration is the reinforcement of the institution’s vision and mission, as well as codes of conduct which entail review and clarification and serve as a starting point to its student disciplinary process (Dannells, 1997).

Adults can facilitate learning such as mentoring (Bhatti & Viney, 2010), coaching (Devine et al., 2013), feedback (Allen et al., 2010), and debriefing (Ostovar et al., 2018), and the cognitive and emotional engagements of these trained students rely as much on the presence of encouraging adults around them as on the program itself. With the guidance of supportive adults in the community, students involved in the disciplinary process are found to increase in confidence, civic empowerment, and critical consciousness. Kraus promotes that supportive adult relationships positively impact young people’s engagement. Hence, it is also noteworthy that adults, especially those involved in the conduct process, be involved in the learning and development of student jurors.

Methodology

Research design

The design of this research is a qualitative formative evaluation. A formative evaluation is conducted during the implementation of a program or its development (Hall et al., 2014; Mathison, 2005). Such evaluation helps develop an understanding of the program participants' interpretations as well as their experiences (Hall et al., 2014). Rectifications may be made while the program is running without waiting for the end point where a summative evaluation may then be done. Thus, presented here is the qualitative formative evaluation of the student representatives in the first cases that they handled.

Participants

Participants for this study were drawn purposively from the 19 newly appointed members representing different colleges. Eight (8) newly appointed student representatives for the university discipline panel participated (4 males, 4 females; 42%).

Instrument

The instrument used for the evaluation of the program was the reflective essays on the first case taken as official major discipline case student representatives, the participants in this study.

Data gathering

After the appointment of the new student members to the university discipline panel, these student representatives began to take their schedule for the case conferences. The time the participants take their first case depends on their availability to handle the case as well as the availability of a scheduled case. Thus, a student discipline representative may take his or her first case at any time within the academic year.

Being finally seated as a student discipline representative in the panel is a culmination of one's preparatory activities for the role and shows the student member what he or she has learned in the training preparations and further development program activities. The students were asked to write a reflective essay about their first case experience.

Data analysis

Line-by-line analysis (Thomas & Harden, 2008) was used to develop themes for the data. The essays were first numbered per line. The researcher conducted an initial analysis of the essay and marked the responses that describe the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the participant. These were then transferred verbatim to a table. This table was created to develop the descriptive themes from the general data set. The researcher continued to analyze the encoded responses from the transferred notes. These were labeled from a conceptual perspective. Using the first case as the main source of themes, the other participant essays were analyzed. New labels were generated as new ideas emerged from the data. This iterative process was continually done until the last case. The researcher continued the iterative process by reanalyzing the data in different timeframes.

Findings and Discussion

The researcher's observations on the first case experience of the participants showed a chronological order of presentation of thoughts and recount of experiences: before, during and after one's case conference.

While most of the participants focused their reflections on the skills that they were able to apply in the case conference room as well as the areas where they needed to improve further, some focused their reflections on the way they had presented themselves in the room or the emotions they had felt while taking the role as the student representative of the cases they have handled.

Competence

The need for competence, as found in the results when the development program was crafted, was seen in the findings of this evaluation study. The competence needs of the student representative to the discipline panel as seen in their reflections can be gleaned in the areas in which they want to improve, such as in developing their questions shown in the statements,

"...to perform better with asking questions and especially setting the mood and praying..." (Student #1, Lines 6-7), and

"Formulating the questions required careful consideration of how the discussion would flow." (Student #2, Lines 4-5)

Getting a coherent picture of the case scenario was also considered a challenge and has also been a competence driver for the students.

"Processing the information required serious attention to detail." (Student #2, Line1)

"I was trying to think of questions to ask, but with only that information, it was hard for me to think of what I could ask..." (Student #6, Lines 11-12)

However, competence in the boardroom is not only limited to the cognitive aspect of the case. Students in their first case also had to consider the perspective of the main person involved – the student-respondent. Empathy, the emotional phenomenon in which "one individual, through observation of another, comes to experience some change in his or her thoughts or feelings" (Davis, 2006), is also something that students realize on the process and need to actively work on, before, during and after the case conference.

"Putting myself in the shoes of the evaluated student brought me to the student's situation..." (Student #2, Line 11)

"I realized that I need to be more careful in treating different cases with same violations...since different persons undergo different circumstances...and that although they may have the same type of violation, they may not have reasons as to why they did so." (Student #3, Lines 8-11)

"To be able to help the respondent, the key is listening and understanding." (Student #5, Line 19)

Additionally, the student representative in the boardroom needs to be able to process the social environment. Student representatives also become keen on taking the perspective of others in the room, especially the focal person in the student-respondent.

"...the respondent...was caught in the situation where he was not able to think properly because of the circumstance...Not all violations committed by students are purposely done or fully intentional." (Student #4, Lines 3-4, 12)

"It is to dig deeper and find insights that aren't written in the report. It is to know the respondent and understand his/her situation more and what led him/her to commit the offense." (Student #5, Lines 11-13)

As such may be the case for the need for competence in fulfilling the role, some of these student representatives also showed concerns about self-presentations in the panel and in how they performed,

"Will I be able to ask the right questions that would lead into a meaningful discussion?" (Student #6, Lines 6-7)

"...how you brand or present yourself to others should be how you would want them to perceive you..." (Student #8, Lines 17-18)

Thus, the surfacing of competence as a recurring theme for this formative evaluation revealed that student representatives strive to present themselves well in front of their older, professional fellow panel members as well as with their peers who are the responding student charged with the violation. Also, they are particular with the cognitive, social, and emotional aspects of the case that they handled.

Decision-making

Inevitably, the case conference with the student respondent had to culminate with a resolution. This is the integration of the student representatives' preparations for the case as well as the product of his/her evaluation of the meeting. Making a decision – the case resolution – that is just, and fair is an ultimate goal for one's presence in the panel/board. As members of the adjudicating body, the student representative to the discipline panel speaks of this part as,

"...deliberate in an informed manner as I strived to balance emotion and rationality." (Student #2, Lines 12-13)

"This part was really challenging for me because I had to understand where the student was coming from." (Student #6, Line 20-21)

"I also learned about the importance of being objective about the case I'm handling." (Student #3, Line 11-12)

For the student representative, decision-making in the boardroom needs to consider many things such as what is going on in him/herself – feeling, awareness of biases, and being purposive of one's presence in the university panel.

"... to ensure that I will make the best decision in order to help form the student..." (Student #3, Line 14-15)

"I always had in my mind that I should be able to help the student, get the idea on what is the real reason why she was there, and try to help her be better...I had to place myself into her shoes to really assess the situation and see what she needs to learn. I had to consider her school workloads and at the same time the additional work that we are about to give her due to her violations – on what would be the effect on her"
(Student #6, Lines 18-24)

"...our responsibility is to determine the best solution in helping the students become better versions of themselves" (Student #2, Lines 22-23)

It is interesting to consider that students were able to unify the different skill components for a student discipline representative in fulfilling his/her role to make a just and fair case resolution. This statement sums it up well,

"Each person goes through unique experiences, and that's why the resolution for each case varies from person to person." (Student #5, Lines 17-18)

Vicarious learning

Vicarious learning has been defined as "being able to observe or 'listen in' on experts or peers as they discuss a new topic, learning through the experiences of another...or from a competent other" (Roberts, 2010). The student discipline representatives also experience vicarious learning as the members of the board share words of wisdom with the respondents. Student representatives are able not only to learn from the case the chronology of its events and the technical repercussions of the behavior, based on the student handbook but also the wisdom learned as they reflect on their own personal experiences while in the boardroom.

"During the hearing, I gained a lot of insight and learning points from the professionals in the panel. As they were giving advice to the student, I was able to pick up some life lessons which I can apply to myself."
(Student #2, Lines 16-18)

Learning from adults in the panel showed that students are observing the ways of the adults. Just as the senior student representatives have shared about learning from the mentors, the student representatives were keen on learning from the adults in the process.

"During the mock session with (the coordinator) ...I realized that my questions were not enough to make the respondent reflect on his actions. The session helped me a lot with formulating better questions and in delivering my ideas." (Student #5, Lines 4-6)

Indeed, students learn a lot from the adults in their environment.

Some of the student representatives focused their self-reflections on the student-respondent of the case. It is striking to note that what stands out to these students is the vicarious learning that they have with the student charged with the case. How the experience of the other person is being processed socially and cognitively by the student representative reflecting on the case shows that the manner in which different student representatives, members of the adjudicating body, varies greatly in how they perceive the

student-respondents in the case conference room. For this particular student representative member, there seemed to be an attempt to understand a fellow student,

"...the respondent... was caught in the situation where he was not able to think properly because of the circumstance." (Student #4, Lines 3-4)

However, as if the resolution is later implied,

"In the end, they regret this choice once they realize the mistake they have done and the consequences that came after it." (Student #4, Lines 13-15).

Emotions

It is also noteworthy to discuss the different emotions that student representatives reported in their first case experience. From feeling nervous and uncertain at the start of the case to disbelief in the nature of the case.

"I was quite nervous... ..I wasn't sure if I knew the flow of the case conference well enough." (Student #5, Lines 1, 8)

"I was pretty nervous the whole week thinking about what will actually happen during the actual case.... I personally have never imagined someone who could..." (Student #6, Lines 3-4, 9)

Being overwhelmed with the experience, feeling pressured and a sense of a difference in reality from what one has prepared oneself for also describes the feelings of these first timers. Indeed, one learns from actual experience.

"...no amount of training and visualizations can compare to the real thing...since some things might not go the way that I was expecting them to be..." (Student #3, Lines 3-5)

"...it was an overwhelming experience..." (Student #2, Line 9)

"There is a lot of pressure as a student representative. We are always the first to speak up...to ask questions and to give opinions." (Student #5, Lines 15-16)

There were also moments of self-doubts as they take on their first cases. Issues arose as they personally critiqued the performance of the skills that they have been trained in or questioned the way they presented themselves as competent student representatives in the adjudicating body.

"...my questions weren't as good in extracting info and reflecting purposes..." (Student #1, Lines 3-4)

"Will I be confident enough to speak up my real concerns and questions? Will the other student be accommodating enough to answer my questions? Will I be able to ask the right questions that would lead into a meaningful discussion?" (Student #6, Lines 4-7)

Regardless of how one felt at the start, or even during the disciplinary proceeding, the case conferences of the students appeared to have ended well as students felt optimistic and grateful after their first cases.

“I’d like to take more (repeated violations) cases, so I’d have a specialty case and have practice in the same game.” (Student #1, Lines 7-8)

“I do hope that I improve more and become better in my role as a (student representative). I’m truly grateful to have been given this opportunity...I hope what I do can really bring help to others.” (Student #5, Lines 20-22)

“It was a really grateful opportunity, having to be part of a life of a person, knowing that at some point, you were able to help them become better. As a student, I myself is also thankful for the school for having this initiative of giving us an opportunity to help our fellow students... knowing that the satisfaction that I get from helping them will be priceless...” (Student #6, Lines 28-30, 33-34)

Researcher reflections

It is interesting to note that the chronological reflections stated by the students as they handled their first disciplinary cases have been of different colors and hues. While many have shared competence, as the themes have shown, the differences in these perceived competencies seem to lie in a spectrum from self-doubt to an increased level of confidence in trying to feel the social and emotional atmosphere inside the boardroom, as well as in personally assessing the reasonings of the student charged with the violation.

While inside the boardroom, the students’ observations around them, particularly the adults who work with them in handling the case are very important as they glean important professional and life lessons from them as well. As they share their experiences and perspectives as students themselves, they are also inspired by the people they work with and feel the importance of personally applying the lessons that others have experienced. In terms of decision-making, students have learned to take other perspectives, use critical thinking abilities, show awareness of their biases, and strove for impartiality. Similar to the hues and colors of their competence needs, the emotions they felt before, during, and after the case hearings were as varied. And just as they feel, I am optimistic that despite the roller coaster ride of these feelings, as they mature in their roles, this program will form them to emerge with the graduate attributes our university envisions them to be.

Conclusion

The findings of this study were four themes that surfaced from the students’ experiences: competence, decision-making, vicarious learning, and emotions. This study supports previous research on the importance of supportive adult relationships, which positively impact young people’s engagement, as well as the involvement of students in the disciplinary process.

It is amazing how much one can glean from the first case experiences of the student discipline case representatives. This study reiterates its finding what Stoner II (2000) assents in involving students in the disciplinary process because they can understand their peers better. This also not paves an understanding of others, as accorded in the development of an empathic stance towards the situation but also in the vicarious learning

that students experience – both from their peers and adults. The findings have also shown the importance of mentoring, coaching, and feedback on the performance of students. The need to perform competently in different facets of the case conference has been evident in the results as student representatives engage cognitively, emotionally, and socially in the process to derive at a fair and just resolution as they make decisions about the case. This study also promotes Kraus findings on the importance of supportive adult relationships, which positively impact young people’s engagement. Further program enhancement is recommended through continual formative evaluation using qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

It is important to realize the role that adults play in the development of our students, not only in skills but also in the many unspoken things the adults around them do that they observe and catch. Truly, student programs ought to be more intent on the accompaniment that the university accords to these young people. After all, this is what we, educators, do best.

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