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Academic Leaders' Confidence in Using the Academic Decision Making Model (ADMM)

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Abstract

This study explored the use of the Academic Decision-Making Model (ADMM) for professional development of department leaders in higher education. The study results confirmed that the model was effective as a framework for increasing participants' knowledge about how to solve problems and building confidence for making complex decisions involving administrators, faculty, staff, and students.

Keywords

Decision Making; Higher Education; Professional Development

1. Introduction

The purpose of this research was to explore university department leaders' (heads and chairs) confidence and readiness for decision-making after participating in a two-day seminar using the Academic Decision Making Model (ADMM) (Smith, 1993). This study addressed the following questions: 1) what was the impact of the ADMM on participants' level of confidence in making good decisions in budget planning and control, curriculum and instruction, external administration, personnel administration, internal administration, professional development, and student relations? 2) What impact did the ADMM have on participants' readiness for decision-making? 3) How did the professional development seminar influence the academic chairs' use of the ADMM during the remaining academic year?

2. Theoretical Framework

Department chairs, as significant leaders in higher education, are responsible for making decisions on a daily

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basis (Hecht, Higgerson, Gmelch, & Tucker, 1999; Wheeler, Seagren, Becker, Kinley, Mlinek, & Robson, 2008). Previous research has indicated that as much as 80 percent of decisions in higher education are made at the department level (Creswell & England, 1994; Gmelch, 1994). The department head's responsibilities cover a wide range of issues: department governance and office management, curriculum and program development, faculty matters, student matters, communication with external public, financial, and facilities management (Hecht et al., 1999). Pettit (1999) identified seven categories of tasks regularly attended to by department chairs: 1) curriculum and instruction; 2) internal administration; 3) professional development; 4) human relations and personnel administration; 5) budget planning, development, and control; 6) student relations; and 7) external administration. Ho, Dey, and Higson (2006) posited that higher education has generally faced four major higher decision problems, namely resource allocation, performance measurement, budgeting, and scheduling. According to (Bethel, 1990), the consequences of ill-prepared leaders and indecisive leadership may undermine trust, forfeit everyone's future, and waste time, talent, money, and opportunity.

The professional training seminar, Decision Making for Academic Leaders (Smith, 1993), used in this study was designed around adult learning principles (Knowles, 1984). Knowles suggests that an adult's maturity is related to self-concept, experience, readiness to learn, immediacy of application, and internal motivation and that these characteristics must be taken into consideration when designing and implementing training for adults. Other researchers (Bland, Weber-Main, Lund, & Finstad, 2005) conclude that strategies that are research-based help departments excel. Thus, it was theorized that Department Heads and Chairs would benefit from training based on research and practice to perform their functions in a more effective manner.

3. Methods

This study involved 33 academic department heads (13 females, 20 males) invited to participate in a higher education system-wide professional development seminar (12 hours). During the two-day seminar the academic leaders applied the ADMM to real case studies involving critical issues with respect to personnel, budget, evaluation, and other matters related to the academic department chair/head position.

The general questions in the Academic Decision Making Model (ADMM) that guided the decision making process involved the following steps:

Step 1: Whether to make the decision?
Step 2: Who makes the decision?
Step 3: When to make the decision?
Step 4: How to make the best decision?
Step 5: How is the decision implemented?

All participants volunteered for the training as well as the research project. Thirty-two (32) of the 33 participants completed the pre and post survey and 10 randomly selected participants were interviewed by telephone. The majority (n = 22; 66.7%) identified themselves as Caucasian; two (6.1%) as African Americans; four (12.1%) as Hispanic; and four (12.1%) as Asian Americans. One participant did not specify ethnic background.

3.1. Instrumentation

Two instruments (written survey, interview protocol) were developed by the researchers to measure the feasibility of the ADMM and department heads' confidence and readiness for decision-making. The survey was administered to participants on Day 1 prior to the introduction of the content and at the end of the seminar (Day 2) and consisted of two parts: background information and decision making perceptions. The measurement of decision-making perceptions included seven items requiring ranking of categories in decision-making, confidence in decision-making, satisfaction with the decision-making model, and application of the decision-making model. The telephone interview protocol was conducted by the lead researcher approximately eight months after the seminar and included questions about department heads' perceptions of the ADMM, application of the ADMM in decision-making, and their reflections about the professional development seminar for decision-making. The interview questions also focused on obtaining specific examples as to how the decision-making model had been used in their work as administrators.

3.2. Data Collection

At the beginning and again at the end of the 2-day professional development session, participants were asked to

voluntarily respond to the paper/pencil survey. Thirty-two of the 33 participants completed the surveys. On the post survey participants were asked about their willingness to be contacted for the follow-up interview and 10 of those who responded positively were randomly selected to participate. The interviews were conducted by telephone by the lead researcher approximately eight months following the seminar. The scheduled and structured interviews ranged from 11 to 23 minutes and invited participants to elaborate on the overall effectiveness of the model in their work. The interview focused on soliciting specific examples of how the model was used in working with faculty, students, and administrators.

4. Confidence in Decision Making

The researchers employed paired *t*-tests to statistically compare the mean score differences in the decision-making categories prior to and after the training in order to answer the question as to whether the participants experienced a similar level of confidence in making good decisions prior to the seminar as compared to after the seminar (See **Table 1**). As shown in **Table 1**, six of seven decision-making categories (Budgets, External administration, Human relations, Internal administration, Professional development, and Student relations) reached the level of statistical significance ($p < .05$) indicating that the seminar had a significant impact on the participants' subsequent decision making in key role responsibilities. The failure of the category "Curriculum" to reach the statistically significant level may be due to the fact that curriculum and instruction decisions and judgments of the efficacy of changes require longer periods of time to implement and measure.

5. Readiness for Decision Making

The statistics used for reporting the results of the multiple regressions were standardized regression coefficients (β) indicating the associations between the dependent variable and each independent variable in the regression equation; the overall R-squared indicated the amount of variance in the participants' decision making readiness that was accounted for by gender, ethnicity and decision making model. **Table 2** presents the multiple regression results. The R-squared explains 21% of the original variability with 80% residual variability. Gender and Decision-making relationship was positive and Ethnicity was negative to the dependent variable.

Table 1. Confidence in decision making.

Categories: Prior To vs. After Seminar ($N = 32$)	*MD*	*SD*	*SE*	*t*	*p*
Budget	−.39	.70	.12	−3.21	.003
Curriculum	−.09	.52	.09	−1.00	.325
External administration	−.50	.80	.14	−3.52	.001
Human relations	−.61	.90	.16	−3.87	.001
Internal administration	−.39	.97	.17	−2.34	.026
Professional development	−.39	.70	.12	−3.21	.003
Student relations	−.30	.64	.11	−2.73	.010

Table 2. Multiple regression results.

Predictor ($N = 32$)	Decision making readiness			
	B	*SE*	*t*	*p*
		1.877	8.928	.000
Gender	.151	1.339	.891	.380
Ethnicity	−.317	.615	−1.814	.080
Decision-making model	.368	.627	2.095	.045

Note: R-squared = .209 ($p = .083$).

In terms of the satisfaction with the model, the descriptive statistics indicated that a majority (28) of participants were satisfied with the model and held positive views of the model for decision-making. For instance, some participants commented, “Great protocol! I am posting above my computer;” “Great use of real work scenarios to apply concepts;” “It appears rather cumbersome, but will provide a good model for major decisions;” and, “... does offer varied levels of approach.”

A total of 55 concepts and perceptions emerged from the interview transcripts. **Table 3** depicts the most common perceptions expressed by the Department Heads during the interviews and are categorized in seven sets of common concepts including: awareness and confidence; helpful tool/resource in practice; domain identification; urgency of decision-making; faculty/student involvement; professional development; and miscellaneous comments.

Among all the comments concerning department heads’ perceptions of the ADMM, 12 comments focused on department heads’ self-discovery or awareness and confidence. Comments included, “made me more aware of how I’m making a decision,” and “validates my approach and actions as a department chair.” There were 11 comments that focused specifically on the helpfulness of the ADMM in practice. Other comments included “provided a tool for decision making;” “ADMM helpful;” and “helped to have a strategy.” There were another 11 comments noting the importance as well as challenges in identifying domains (areas of responsibilities) in decision-making.

6. Application of the ADMM

The interviews revealed the application of the ADMM in department heads’ decision making subsequent to the seminar. A total of 35 items emerged from the data and seven categories were identified. The categories included Curriculum and instruction, Professional development, Internal administration, Budget management, Personnel relations, External administration, and Student relations (see **Table 4**). The department leaders applied the ADMM in the seven categories, covering a wide range of common tasks and issues for department heads (Pettitt, 1999). The most common response in the interviews indicated that the ADMM provided a framework for making decisions on a personal level and with professional interactions with faculty. A sense of increased confidence in making decisions was projected in the interviews by having a common approach to solving problems.

Table 3. Perceptions of ADMM.

Item categories	Number	Percent
Awareness & confidence	12	22
Helpful resource in practice	11	20
Domain identification	11	20
Urgency of decision making	7	13
Faculty/student involvement	5	9
Professional development	5	9
Miscellaneous	4	7
Total	55	100

Table 4. Applying the ADMM.

Item categories	Number of items	Percent of items
Curriculum	8	23
Professional development	8	23
Internal administration	7	20
Budget management	5	14
Personnel relations	3	9
External administration	2	6
Student relations	2	6
Total	35	101

For instance, "decision in your sphere of responsibilities was important;" "struggle to define domain especially with people above me;" and "difficult when others don't stay within their domains." A general consensus emerged with respect to not making quick decisions as a leader, even though it was expected in many cases. The top three most frequently mentioned items in department heads' application of the ADMM in decision making were issues related to curriculum and instruction (23%), professional development (23%), and internal administration (20%). For example, comments in the category of internal administration included "used model with faculty member resisting updating his syllabus," and "used the 5 step method (ADMM) in resolving faculty complaints."

Significance of the Study

This study provides insights into the importance of having an effective decision-making model for bringing about successful solutions to problems experienced in the role of a department leader. As the literature about academic leadership suggests, problem solving and decision making are complex processes not generally supported with professional development in academic institutions or higher education systems. In addition, this research supported the feasibility of the ADMM and confirmed that the model can positively influence confidence and readiness of academic leaders for problem solving and decision making in higher education settings. Practically, the findings of this study indicated that professional development in decision-making is needed by academic leaders in order to negotiate and make progress in a myriad of professional contexts. The department chairs in this study consistently reported that after being introduced to the ADMM and practicing it with real problems during the training seminar, they were better able to make decisions by following the steps in the model. Conceptually, this study also holds significance for our better understanding of decision-making and the importance of establishing readiness for making decisions by having knowledge of and practice with a structured model to guide the process.

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