SLI Results and Student Leadership Development

The Student Leadership Inventory (SLI) was developed by the Student Affairs Student Leadership Team several years ago and has been used for leadership skill development assessment across several departments and programs since that time. The SLI assesses six dimensions of leadership skills:

- Critical Thinking
- Communication
- Interpersonal Skills
- Ethics and Professionalism
- Intrapersonal Skills
- Group Process Management

Each of these six dimensions is composed of several sub-dimensions or subscales, with a total of 34 subscales across the six dimensions. The administration method used is self-assessment by students of their leadership across these dimensions at the beginning of a leadership experience and toward the end of that experience. Examples of the leadership roles included are intramural manager, Chancellor’s Leadership Academy participant, and resident assistant (RA). Typically students rate their initial level of development at the same time as their “post” ratings; we found initially that some students’ “pre” self-ratings were somewhat higher than the “post”, and interviews with these students revealed that they later felt as though had been deceiving themselves initially about their capabilities. This problem has been described in the literature as a sort of halo effect referred to as a response shift effect.

Differences pre-post are typically in the range of .4-.5 points on a 1-5 scale, with initial ratings often in the 3.5-4.0 range, and post ratings typically above 4.0. No particular programs or dimensions stand out as more or less likely to reflect significant gains. On average, students in all programs make substantial gains across most of the subscales as a result of their leadership experiences. These results are impressive and speak to the power of the leadership experiences in which S&T students are engaged.

Ideally, other measures would be used to assess leadership development in addition to student self-ratings (an indirect assessment). Practically, however, this is very difficult. A 360 assessment would seem to be a helpful tool, for example, but imagine 20 or more students doing ratings of each of their peers across several dimensions. Then imagine trying to sort through the resulting mountain of data! Even evaluations by the professional staff overseeing the program are often non-feasible due to the large amount of time needed to do the ratings, analyze the data, and try to discuss the results with each student. In a large program with many students involved, more extensive assessment methods become impracticable or impossible. Valid direct assessment methods are also difficult to find and utilize, as these usually require a large investment of time (and sometimes money) and are often difficult to use in practice. The practical validity of many of these methods is questionable, as well. In spite of these hurdles, we remain open to other methods of assessing leadership development among our students.