
9-1-2014

Leaders and Recruiters from the Next Generation: A Phenomenological Study

Lautrice M. Nickson

Sam Houston State University, lmn005@shsu.edu

Richard C. Henriksen Jr.

Sam Houston State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/tqr>



Part of the [Quantitative, Qualitative, Comparative, and Historical Methodologies Commons](#), and the [Social Statistics Commons](#)

Recommended APA Citation

Nickson, L. M., & Henriksen, R. C. (2014). Leaders and Recruiters from the Next Generation: A Phenomenological Study. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(35), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2014.1018>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the The Qualitative Report at NSUWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Qualitative Report by an authorized administrator of NSUWorks. For more information, please contact nsuworks@nova.edu.



Qualitative Research Graduate Certificate
Indulge in Culture
Exclusively Online • 18 Credits
LEARN MORE

NSU
NOVA SOUTHEASTERN
UNIVERSITY

NOVA SOUTHEASTERN

Leaders and Recruiters from the Next Generation: A Phenomenological Study

Abstract

Studies involving student ambassadors have demonstrated their significance in recruiting prospective students to universities and colleges but they have not included the perceptions of the student ambassadors themselves. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions and experiences of students who served as student ambassadors for their educational institution. Fifteen student ambassadors provided individual descriptions of their perceptions of being an ambassador. Four themes provided a description of ambassadors' perceptions: (a) belonging, (b) personal growth, (c) diversity, and (d) recruitment. A discussion of the benefits of student ambassadors as leaders are presented in terms of their ability to recruit for the university and college as well as the impact being a leader has on the ambassadors themselves.

Keywords

Ambassador, Student Leaders, Recruiting, Phenomenology, Qualitative Research

Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Leaders and Recruiters from the Next Generation: A Phenomenological Study

Lautrice M. Nickson and Richard C. Henriksen Jr.
 Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas, USA

Studies involving student ambassadors have demonstrated their significance in recruiting prospective students to universities and colleges but they have not included the perceptions of the student ambassadors themselves. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the perceptions and experiences of students who served as student ambassadors for their educational institution. Fifteen student ambassadors provided individual descriptions of their perceptions of being an ambassador. Four themes provided a description of ambassadors' perceptions: (a) belonging, (b) personal growth, (c) diversity, and (d) recruitment. A discussion of the benefits of student ambassadors as leaders are presented in terms of their ability to recruit for the university and college as well as the impact being a leader has on the ambassadors themselves. Keywords: Ambassador, Student Leaders, Recruiting, Phenomenology, Qualitative Research

Dating back to 1948, colleges and universities have used students to serve as campus ambassadors to aid in the recruitment of students to their respective colleges and universities and to specific programs (Clark, 1949). The use of student ambassadors continues into the present with an expanded role that now also includes mentoring of disadvantaged students and running residential summer schools (Ylonen, 2010).

Universities today are being challenged to find and recruit new students to both maintain and increase enrollments. With the desire to continue to grow, universities also seek to diversify the student population to become more reflective of the society at large. One way to provide both student leaders and to improve overall recruitment efforts is the establishment of student ambassador programs (Ruderman & Niparko, 2010; Walker, 1999; Ylonen, 2010). However, little attention has been paid to the development of ambassador programs and there are few studies that have looked at what makes them work (Rhodes, Sherwin, & Smith, 2006; Ylonen, 2010).

Gabelko and Sosniak (2002) found that when it comes to recruiting students into academic programs "academic engagement trumps race, class, and gender" (p. 400). They also found that recruitment of diverse students is increased when students who are engaged in similar academic pursuits recruit other students with similar interests with the result being a more diverse pool of students. Gartland and Pacsuska (2007) found that when student ambassadors are trusted by potential college students they become positive sources of information, especially for potential students with no family history of higher education.

Student ambassador groups are usually created as a student club, either within a small college or university setting or within a specific division (e.g., college of education, business college, etc.) of a larger academic institution (Ruderman & Niparko, 2010). The primary goal of an ambassador program is to recruit potential students to a college or university or to specific programs within a college or university (Ylonen, 2010). For example, at the University of California at Los Angeles, 6.8 % of college freshman enter college undecided about their major (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Blake, & Tran, 2009). Ambassadors could have helped those students make decisions about a major prior or entering college. To help increase enrollment in nursing programs, student ambassadors have taken a primary role in

recruitment because of the advantage they have over traditional recruiters being current students (Rhodes, Sherwin, & Smith, 2006).

Purpose of Ambassadors

Ambassadors are charged with many duties. For example, college ambassadors may be required to recruit incoming freshman and sophomore level transfer students to their respective colleges or programs, building relationships with incoming freshmen and sophomores, relating their personal triumphs and experiences with these recruits, and attracting them to their prospective colleges and universities. Student ambassadors are often sophomores, juniors or seniors. They have completed the initial college courses and are enrolled in courses within their academic majors. Many incoming freshmen and sophomores view ambassadors as role models, advisors, and confidants.

Because of the paucity of research available that is focused on the role of student ambassadors both in the United States and abroad, especially from the perspective of the ambassadors themselves, there is a need for additional research. This study was conducted in part to help fill the gap in the existing literature by focusing on the perspective of the student ambassadors themselves. The voices of student ambassadors are absent in the literature and could provide a different perspective that is relevant to those whom they wish to recruit. The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions and experiences of students who served as student ambassadors for their educational institution.

Benefits of Ambassador Programs for Educational Institutions

Ambassadors are given the responsibility of showcasing the college and university through their participation in academic and social events (Ylonen, 2010). Ambassador programs are also ways for colleges and universities to promote the quality of students represented in a specific college/university or degree program. According to Ruderman and Niparko, (2010) there is nothing more influential than showing alumni, donors, and business partners that a school's caliber of students is continuously improving. For example, student ambassadors from Sam Houston State University, College of Education Ambassadors' program visit high schools to recruit prospective students to education and related programs, speak with donors, give tours of the campus to potential students, and attend alumni events.

Implementing a student ambassador program has many benefits to the respective college or university. During special events, ambassadors may speak to prospective students and serve as guides to alumni and donors. Student ambassadors represent their educational institutions at academic and social events, homecoming, building dedications, career days, college days, and job fairs. These responsibilities strengthen the educational institution's connection to the community (Walker, 1999; Rhodes et al., 2006; Ylonen, 2010).

The impact of student ambassador programs can lead to increases in the enrollment of underrepresented students (Ylonen, 2010). Student ambassadors can help to recruit members of "underrepresented groups" by recruiting the students they know who live in their own communities (Gabelko & Sosniak, 2002). Before the student ambassador program was implemented at The University of Manitoba student enrollment in the Freshman Success Seminar course was 209 in 1996 and 219 in 1997. However, since the ambassador program was implemented student enrollment in the Freshman Success Seminar course increased to 342 in 1998 and 365 in 1999 (Walker, 1999).

Benefits of Ambassador Programs for Students

Student ambassadors often become some of the most visible and well-known students on campus. When successfully managed, student ambassador groups and their members are highly regarded by those who have the opportunity to interact with them on and off campus (Ruderman & Niparko, 2010). They are given the opportunity to connect with other students and to build lifelong friendships and support. Developmental benefits include training in essential areas such as networking, job search skills, and leadership (Ruderman & Niparko, 2010; Ylonen, 2010). Student Ambassadors learn to be poised and polished from their contacts with alumni and the many training activities in which they participate (Gabelko & Sosniak, 2002). From this training, ambassadors learn about the importance of student recruitment and they improve the ability of colleges and universities to recruit students from diverse backgrounds, particularly African American and Hispanic students (Gabelko & Sosniak, 2002). The student ambassadors are also viewed as leaders and have an advantage when searching for a job.

Findings from this research could have implications for the retention of students who are enrolled in institutions of higher learning. This knowledge may then be used to reduce the number of students who leave their four year intuitions before they graduate because they do not have a sense of belonging, they are not growing personally, or they have not found a mentor. For example, many students are faced with being away from home for the first time. Many times these students struggle with adjusting to life away from their familiar surroundings. Because of these struggles, countless students may never achieve their goal of completing a degree. The role of the ambassador organization is invaluable in helping students have a sense of belonging, personal growth, and mentoring. This support helps to build the camaraderie these students may be missing. A better understanding of the importance of ambassador organizations may be used to reduce the number of students who leave in the first or second semester of college.

Method

In this study, we used a transcendental phenomenological approach to explore the perspective of college students who serve as ambassadors to their college. We explored the lived experiences of college student ambassadors who share a similar understanding of the phenomenon, which is one of the roles of phenomenology (Creswell, 2007). For this study, phenomenology, a first-person perspective of experience, was employed by the researchers to explore the meaning college students give to their ambassador experience. Because of the paucity of research on this topic and the omission of the actual experiences of the student ambassadors themselves, the phenomenological approach was used so that the students themselves could tell the story of their experiences. This approach allowed the authors to share with readers a phenomenon that is not clearly understood or explored.

As a result of this study, we were able to describe how student leaders' lives are impacted and how they serve as examples for other students. We also found that a sense of belonging and responsibility to others helps student leaders to remain in college which increases graduation rates in college. Student leaders serve as catalysts to promote recruitment to the university in addition to helping students gain confidence which in turns helps them to be leaders as well.

Participants

Prior to beginning the search for participants, we completed the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application as required by the university. After approval of the request and in accordance with the conditions set forth in the request, we began to identify potential participants. Potential participants were students who were at the time active student ambassadors who represented the university and the various colleges in the university. Participants were selected through purposeful and snowball sampling. We began by approaching the directors of student ambassador organizations on campus and telling them that we were conducting a study of the perceptions of student ambassadors and were seeking participants to interview. Each potential participant was asked to provide names of other possible participants.

The participants in this study were college student ambassadors from a four year comprehensive university located in Texas. Participants included 10 female students and five male students, 14 participants self-identified as Caucasian and one self-identified as Caucasian and African- American. The student ambassadors ranged in age from 22-30 years old. The participant pool included seven juniors and eight seniors. All students came from middle class backgrounds and were from both rural and urban settings. Each participant completed an informed consent document and was also given a description of the study. They were asked to provide demographic information and if they were willing to be interviewed. All participants were required to be current members of an ambassador group and in good standing to qualify for the study.

Researchers

The authors of this study are both professors in a public university in Texas. The first author is currently the director of a College of Education ambassador program and has served in that position for three plus years. The second author was the developer and director of a College of Education ambassador program and served as director and co-director for three years. Both authors wanted to find out from the ambassadors themselves what led them to become ambassadors, what they got out of being ambassadors, and how they believe they and their institution benefited from having an ambassador program. Both authors spent time journaling about their experiences as ambassador directors and discussed with each other the impact they may have had upon the research. They used an independent auditor to validate all aspects of the research and to ensure that all ethical practices were followed. To help ensure that researcher bias did not impact the study results, member checking was also employed so that the participants could provide input into the reported results and to validate that the results reflected the information they shared.

Instrumentation

All participants completed demographic questions prior to the interview that included: age, academic level, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and gender. This demographic questionnaire was used to gather descriptive information of the participants and to start the interviews. All interviews were conducted by the first author.

A semi-structured interview was also conducted with each participant. Participants were all asked the same basic questions (see Appendix) and follow-up questions based on their answers. The interview questions were developed based on the limited literature available on this topic (Ruderman & Niparko, 2010; Walker, 1999; Watts, 2004; Ylonen, 2010). We also developed interview questions based on our experience as faculty sponsors of

ambassador programs.

Data Collection

Participants were recruited from several college student ambassador programs in Texas at a university they attended. They were recruited at the meetings of three different ambassador groups and an oral invitation to participate was extended to those ambassadors who expressed an interest in participating in the study. Interested students contacted the first author for more information and to schedule individual interviews.

Potential participants were then screened for inclusion criteria that included being an active member of a student leadership organization, classified as an upper classman, and the organization in which the participants were a part of actively recruited for the university. Each interview was private and was scheduled in a confidential location. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at different locations on the education institution's campus focused on meeting the needs of the student participants and lasted approximately one hour. All interviews were audiotaped by the primary researcher and transcribed verbatim by a research assistant.

Each participant was informed about the nature of the study and signed an informed consent prior to the beginning of the interview. Participants also chose a pseudonym that was used during the interview for the purpose of maintaining confidentiality in the study. All interviews were facilitated by the lead researcher. Data was stored on a digital audio recorder and in a password protected computer in the primary researchers locked university office during the transcription process and then the tapes were destroyed following the verification of the transcriptions.

Data Analysis

The procedure for data analysis we used followed the steps outlined by Moustakas (1994) for phenomenological data analysis. During the initial analysis, we found significant statements in the interviews that reflected the participants' experiences surrounding the phenomenon (horizontalization – the process of giving equal value to all statements made by the participants and selecting those statements that provided a foundation of the experience) of being an ambassador. Next, we grouped those statements into meaning units (textural descriptions) and began to develop categories and themes allowing the words from the categories and themes to emerge from the words of the participants. Finally, we developed a description of how the phenomenon was experienced by the participants and developed, from those themes, an overall description of the essence of the experience. Before, during, and after the data analysis process we worked to set aside all prejudgments, by bracketing (i.e., the process of suspending the judgments of the authors about the phenomena studied so that the true essence of the participants experiences could be focused on and analyzed) our experiences through journaling and debriefing (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, (2008).

Trustworthiness

The researchers took several steps to strengthen the trustworthiness of the results of the study. According to Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and Onwuegbuzie and Leech, (2007), the authors of qualitative studies must establish trustworthiness by selecting specific methods to address possible threats to the credibility and validity of the research. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) also pointed out that trustworthiness in a qualitative study can help support the argument that the research findings are credible and valid.

To achieve trustworthiness we consulted with each other during every step of the research process (peer debriefing), especially during the interview process to reduce potential bias (Creswell, 2007). Second, the lead researcher had prolonged engagement in the field (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005), as she had been a faculty sponsor for an ambassador group and had knowledge regarding the ambassador's culture. Third, the lead researcher kept a reflexive journal from the study's inception through the writing process.

The purpose of the journal was to capture the ongoing research process and ensure the potential transferability of the study results. The lead researcher followed the suggestions of Patton (2002) and also included thick descriptions of the setting and reactions to the interviews throughout the reflection process. Finally, the process of member checking was utilized in order to establish the credibility of the data as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). Member checking documents were sent to participants via email and asked the participants to indicate if the data accurately depicted their experiences. In all cases, participants replied affirmatively.

Results

Each participant provided interview data that was used to develop a definition of what it means to be an ambassador, themes that represented their perspectives and experiences as a college student ambassador, and an overall description of the ambassador experience (essence). In the following sections, we will first define what it means to be an ambassador in the words of the participants, present the themes, their descriptions, and the participants' words, and the overall description (essence) of the ambassador experience.

Ambassador Defined

When asked to define an ambassador, participants provided answers that were as varied as the individual participants. However, Susan provided a definition that encompassed the sentiment of all the other participants:

An ambassador is someone who steps up and helps others in any way they can. They are confident, successful, and friendly. An ambassador is someone who can work with a bunch of different people in a professional manner and must also be willing to do whatever is asked of them.

Robert expands on that conceptualization:

An ambassador to me is best defined as someone who impacts [the] lives [of people] around them. They want to use their voice to make a difference at their university. They do this by making sure that what they do has a positive impact on everyone around them.

The idea that an ambassador is a positive individual who stands out from others is a theme that runs not only through the definition of an ambassador but through the other themes as well. The words Robin shared gave us insight into this concept:

I think that [being an ambassador] is, a large part of what you have to do in the university setting with the students and the dynamic of the way things work is to lead by example. There are a lot of students that are looking for that person to step up so that they can follow and hopefully they can gain confidence for

themselves from that and be a leader as well.

Themes

Making use of Moustaka's (1994) data analysis method, each interview was read then specific statements were extracted and repeated statements were eliminated. The process of identifying themes involved grouping statements by the participants. Statements that had similar meanings were grouped together and the words of the participants were used to give each of the themes a name. All the same statements were put in a separate document for further consideration. Following our analysis of each of the interviews we were able to ascribe meaning and uncover four themes. To qualify as a theme, a minimum of five participants had to endorse a particular category. The four identified themes are:

- a) *belonging,*
- b) *personal growth,*
- c) *diversity and*
- d) *recruitment.*

In the following sections, we will provide a description of each of the themes.

Belonging

Six of the 15 participants described belonging to an organization as a vital way to be successful in college. Some indicated the comfort felt by being surrounded by like-minded people. The following quotes are representations of participant statements. Julie explained,

I wanted to go to school but I thought I don't know anywhere else besides this place and I came to XXX and I didn't do so well at first. I sat in the dorm room and I was not happy. As soon as Thursday afternoon or Friday morning came I was gone. Then I got [to] hang out with those student leaders that are already ambassadors. They would be like come hang out with us, let's go here let's go there. I started hanging out with them and I got that group of peers that I needed.

Jerry described belonging in the following words:

When I was being recruited to XXX honor's college I got to sit down and have a regular discussion with the honors program ambassadors at the time and I still remember talking with them and having a regular conversation and it's like these are people I can connect with.

Sam completed the description of the theme of belonging when he stated:

Being an ambassador has impacted my life because I feel that being a part of this organization has helped me to feel like I belong. I have made lifelong friends. We do many things together and they are like family to me.

The students descriptions demonstrated how being an ambassador helped them fit into the college experience and gave them an opportunity to develop more of a social experience. We wanted to determine how the experience of being an ambassador impacted the

participants on a personal level and this theme reflected their need to be a part of something and their need to belong and feel important.

Personal Growth

Eleven participants spoke specifically about how being an ambassador has helped with their personal growth. They see being an ambassador as a unique experience that has a lasting impact. Courtney noted personal growth in the following words:

This has given me the self-esteem I never had in high school. I have excelled and many people come to me for help. I have gone from being invisible to feeling important because I am helping people to succeed in college, when I help them by tutoring them or being a role model as an ambassador.

Alexia talked about personal growth in the following way, "Having that background in the ambassador position and having that title has given me that extra oomph to go the extra distance and so it has greatly impacted many aspects of my life." Finally, Ava reflected on personal growth by stating, "I would say that being an ambassador has given me a backbone. My personality has been greatly affected by being an ambassador. Growing up I was very submissive I let people take advantage of me."

Participants used the interviews as an opportunity to share another aspect of the impact being an ambassador had on each of them. As we saw in the first theme, the participants felt a sense of belonging and now they were also able to express a sense of personal growth. We were able to see how the participants were able to use their membership as ambassadors to increase their self-identity and their view of themselves as being successful and gaining the strength necessary to be outgoing and overcome their sense of being shy.

Diversity

Different types of people and different activities seem to make a great impact on attracting diverse people to ambassador organizations. Eight participants agreed that being an ambassador has helped them to provide diversity to their organization as well as their college/university. Joey described diversity as having an ambassador program that is open to everyone:

Looking at the different ambassador organizations on campus that I'm involved in and that I know of the XXX department is a very diverse group of people. We have [students with] different majors and different ethnicities. We want to be able to sell the organization, you know what I mean, and these different students that are involved in different things, it creates a welcoming message to all the students that are interested in the organization or the institution or the actual ambassadors like actually becoming one.

Jerry expressed the sentiment of the other students by describing diversity as a means to recognize the whole person:

Diversity is more than just race; it involves a multitude of things. Some include traditions, values, and overall anything that make one whole. Each one of us is different and can learn so much from one another. I feel that I have a strong sense of who I am which will help to add diversity to any organization

and even classes that I am in.

The students were able to demonstrate the importance of diversity and the strength it brings to the learning environment. We had hoped that the students would be able to describe how being with a wide diversity of students would impact them and the result was the identification of diversity as a theme. This demonstrates how differences are not viewed in the current generation as negative but as a positive aspect of their college experience.

Recruitment

Ten of the 15 participants stated that recruiting students was a way to promote their organization as well as their university and/or college. Some described the pride they felt when speaking with others about their ambassador organization. The words of Betty reflect the overall sentiment of the students who endorsed this theme:

We travel to high schools across the state and we are required to go to at least two school visits per semester, so we will go to different high school visits and then we also go to Houston Livestock and Show Rodeo. We have a booth there and we're there every single day, all day and we talk to students there and then FFA conventions, which is a huge deal, and we're there every year. We get a good amount of students there and so we do a lot. Any on campus events we try to help out there and then also there's an XXX teacher's conference, and we'll go there too.

Recruitment also means helping attract highly motivated students to attend the college or university represented by the ambassadors. Kayla's words clearly reflect this theme,

We bring in distinguished high school students from across the nation, wherever they have excelled to a level of high honor distinction academically and so we bring them in and we have a supper with them and explain to them how the honors college could possibly help them. It's actually quite interesting because that's one of the reasons why I came to XXX was because of this high school honors supper had occurred my senior year of high school and we actually had it in the XXX.

One of the goals of this study was to determine if the students were able to identify themselves as being important to the overall recruitment efforts of the university and the different colleges. Their words led to the identification of this as a key theme and focus of being an ambassador. The participants' endorsement of this theme reflects the general importance of ambassador programs and their specific importance to the recruitment efforts of the university.

The purpose of this study was to describe the perceptions and experiences of students who served as student ambassadors for their educational institution. We were able to identify the impact that student ambassador organizations had on recruiting prospective students, increasing graduation rates, as well as providing a sense of belonging to students in their first two years of college. We began our study with the hypothesis that student ambassador programs could be a positive benefit for both students and the institution. We found that there was no contrast between the hypothesis and the results of this study. In this study, there was not a variety of ethnic or socio-economic diversity that could have provided us with different perspectives and could have contrasted with the results we obtained. Therefore, additional

interviews and follow-up studies may uncover different experiences and new or expanded themes.

The Essence of Being an Ambassador

In phenomenology, we seek to provide the essence or overall meaning of a phenomenon through the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2007). The results of this study do not mean that we have found one interpretation of the participants' stories it is that we have found one meaning and presented it here. Through the words of the participants we have given structure to the experiences of the ambassadors.

Participants in this study provided definitions of an ambassador and also described many of the positive attributes of an ambassador. Additional descriptions of the benefits of being an ambassador were also provided. Examples of the essence of what constitutes an ambassador included those who selflessly recruit for their university and or/college, possess effective leadership and communication skills, and have a desire to serve.

However, one part of the essence that was not expected was the personal effect that being an ambassador had on each of the participants. The themes focused primarily on the individual growth of the ambassadors and reflected their need to feel and believe that they are a part of something important. By becoming self-assured and building their self-esteem, the ambassadors described how they are able to be recruiters and the face of the institution to alumni and visitors.

Ambassadors are responsible for interacting with prospective students and alumni, but in order to be successful, ambassadors must make a connection with both alumni and the potential students they are recruiting. Connecting with alumni creates the warm, fuzzy feeling that leads supporters to make financial contributions to the university and individual programs (Ruderman & Niparko, 2010). Burton, McKenzie, and Damo (2009) suggested that recruits who make a personal connection with someone on campus are more likely to enroll at that institution. The essence of being an ambassador lies in having university and college pride when recruiting which could have an impact on university and college enrollments and donations for many years.

Discussion

We examined college ambassadors' perceptions of the benefits of being a student leader and ambassador for one's university. Ambassadors' perceptions in this study linked belonging to a group of people like them, personal growth, diversity, and recruitment to being a student leader. Participants discussed attribute as having importance in the overall essence of student leadership. According to the ambassadors, it is important for students to have a sense of being a part of something in order to be successful in college. Further, ambassadors also discussed the importance of having someone with whom to relate. Gabelko and Sosniak, (2002) found that student ambassadors recruited other students with whom they felt connected. Ambassadors who were science fiction buffs recruited other science fiction buffs, artists recruited other artists, and computer enthusiasts brought others, "just like" themselves (Gabelko and Sosniak, 2002).

Secondly, the theme of *personal growth* was mentioned numerous times as a benefit of being a student leader. Participants expressed the different types of personal growth achieved through being an ambassador. The study fits within a growing body of literature focused on increasing student ambassadors' self-confidence. When students become ambassadors, they gain self-confidence and other students and faculty considered the ambassadors as campus leaders (Edelmann, 2005).

Lastly, ambassadors perceived *diversity and recruitment* as a valuable part of student leadership. We found that the student ambassadors revealed the impact they had on recruiting diverse students into their organizations. Consistent with the work of Gabelko and Sosniak (2002) the ambassadors discussed how diversity helped to strengthen their organizations. Ambassadors might be in the best position to recruit from their own ethnic and economic communities (Gabelko & Sosniak, 2002).

Limitations

The focus of this study was on students attending one university in Texas. Because of this focus, the results and discussions can only be applied to the participants in this study and are not generalized to a wider population. Taking a wider geographic look at ambassadors and ambassador programs could lead to the identification of additional themes and may also refute the themes identified here. Additionally, this study was based on student ambassadors in a four year comprehensive, public university. Student ambassadors in private colleges and universities and those who attend community and junior colleges may also have different experiences. Finally, this study included members of one racial/ethnic group with only one participant from a different racial/ethnic background. The results of this study may not apply to members of other racial/ethnic groups.

Implications and Future Research

The research reported here represents only a single study; therefore, before our findings can be used in practical settings, other studies are needed to build on our results in different populations. Our findings, however, do provide valuable information for universities and colleges considering implementing an ambassador program. More specifically, the results of our study can be used to help universities and colleges in planning and considering the range of benefits from having ambassador programs.

Through our research with current student ambassadors, we showed that universities, colleges and student ambassadors benefit from ambassador programs. Benefits such as increased enrollments and increased alumni contributions are examples of benefits to universities and colleges (Ruderman & Niparko, 2010). A sense of belonging, personal growth, and increased self-confidence are some of the many benefits for student ambassadors themselves (Edelmann, 2005). The results of this provided us the information necessary to demonstrate the value of student ambassador programs to current students, potential students, and the colleges and universities the students represent.

Student ambassadors represent an important function in the recruitment efforts of a university. This study focused on learning about the impact that being an ambassador had on the lives of the student ambassadors themselves. Through the words of the participants, we were able to tell their story and to demonstrate the real importance of ambassador programs, and the development of students as future leaders.

References

- Burton, K., McKenzie, E. W., & Damo, P. (2009). Honors ambassadors: A framework for enhancing student and program development. *Honors in Practice*, 5, 171-188.
- Clark, N. M. (1949, May 7). Campus ambassadors. *Saturday Evening Post*, 38-39, 180-183.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions* (2nd ed). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Denzin, N. K., & Lincoln, Y. S. (2005). *The Sage handbook of qualitative research* (3rd ed.).

- Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Edelmann, T. E. (2005). School ambassadors become marketing marvels. *Momentum* 36, 66-69.
- Gabelko, H., & Sosniak, L. A. (2002). 'Someone just like me': When academic engagement trumps race, class, and gender. *Phi Delta Kappa*, 83, 400-405.
- Gartland, C., & Paczuska, A. (2007). Student ambassadors, trust and HE choices. *Journal of Access Policy and Practice*, 4, 108-133.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., & Leech, N. L. (2007). Validity and qualitative research: An oxymoron? *Quality & Quantity: International Journal of Methodology*, 41, 233-249.
- Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Leech, N. L., & Collins, K. M. T. (2008). Interviewing the interpretive researcher: A method for addressing the crises of representation, legitimation, and praxis. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 7, 1-17.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Pryor, J. H., Hurtado, S., DeAngelo, L., Blake, L. P., & Tran, S. (2009). *The American freshman: National norms fall 2009*. Retrieved from <http://www.heri.ucla.edu/pr-display.php?prQry=42>
- Rhodes, S., Sherwin, C., & Smith, L. (2006). The role of student ambassadors in university recruitment. *Nursing Standard*, 20(34), 44-48
- Ruderman, D., & Niparko, K. (2010, July/August). Student ambassador programs: a hidden resource. *University Business Solutions for Higher Education Management*. Retrieved from <http://www.universitybusiness.com/viewarticle.aspx>
- Walker, L. J. S. (1999). Bridging the gap: Students' role in recruitment and retention. *Guidance & Counseling*, 15, 13-18.
- Watts, G. (2004, February 6). Ambassadors, go forth and multiply. *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 24.
- Ylonen, A. (2010). The role of student ambassadors in higher education: An uneasy association between autonomy and accountability. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 34, 97-104.

Appendix

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- 1) *What makes a student ambassador?*
- 2) *How would you define the role a student ambassador?*
- 3) *What has been your experience as a student ambassador?*
- 4) *As a student ambassador, describe your role in recruitment?*
- 5) *How does your role as a student ambassador increase opportunities for diversity?*

Author Note

Lautrice M. Nickson, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Sam Houston State University; Richard C. Henriksen Jr., Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling, Sam Houston State University.

This research was supported in part by a grant from the Sam Houston State University, College of Education Enrichment Fund.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lautrice M. Nickson,

Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Sam Houston State University, PO Box 2119, Huntsville, TX 77340-2119. Email: lmn005@shsu.edu

Copyright 2014: Laurice M. Nickson, Richard C. Henriksen Jr., and Nova Southeastern University.

Article Citation

Nickson, L. M., & Henriksen, R. C., Jr. (2014). Leaders and recruiters from the next generation: A phenomenological study. *The Qualitative Report*, 19(69), 1-13. Retrieved from <http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR19/nickson69.pdf>
