

**In this issue...**

A ten-year longitudinal study by Dr. Michelle McGrath, executive director of the Wisconsin Association of School Councils, found that participation in the WASC Leadership Camp provided students with leadership skills necessary to be successful in their lives—both as students and later in their careers.

# The Advocate

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## The Urgency of Youth Leadership Development The Impact of the Wisconsin Association of School Councils' Leadership Camp on the Lives of Participants

By Michelle Marie TerMaat-McGrath

"Each of us plays a part in every child's life. It takes a village to raise a child" (Clinton, 1996, p. 12). It is with this profound responsibility that adult leaders of today take a step back and begin to seriously contemplate the imperative ways they will prepare young leaders for the world they will inherit.

Research has been done to see how society is preparing young people for success. The findings surprisingly identify the soft skills such as effective communication, collaboration, and organization, as being key components to master in order to successfully live in the ever-changing world our children will soon lead. Significant data indicate that young adults lack the soft skills necessary to succeed in today's workplace and global marketplace. Ensuring that society is preparing youth to assume the responsibilities of the future becomes the foundation for youth leadership development.

### Job Readiness Skills

Branson (1999) in conjunction with the Center for Civic Education insisted that almost every facet of existence is tied to the ever-changing circles of globalization. To survive within this structure, young leaders need to have essential leadership skills and assume the complex responsibilities of a global world. According to the Afterschool Alliance (2005) a person in the 1950s did not need a college education to fully participate in the global marketplace. Most jobs were classified as "unskilled," requiring no additional training or preparation. Today, jobs classified as "skilled," requiring additional training and preparation, are in highest demand.

While this data is significant, further analysis of the data indicated that knowledge domains necessary for these jobs rank far below other skills such as effective communication, collaboration, and organization, when it comes to preparing youth for job

readiness and success (Levine, 2007). In addition, the Afterschool Alliance added that young leaders of today also need such skills as solving problems and working in diverse groups to thrive in today's workforce.

A survey by Johnson (2002) polled post-secondary personnel and found that high school graduates lacked job readiness and the necessary leadership skills to meet the job requirements. These conclusions are confirmed by a study conducted by the Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills. In this study, Casner-Lotto (2006) surveyed 400 employers across the United States about the workforce readiness of recent high school and college graduates. Their findings focused on the lack of readiness high school graduates have to enter the work force and be successful. Specifically, they found that the development of leadership skills was one of the foundational pieces for preparing children to lead effective and successful lives. Prensky (2008) added, "It's their after-school education, not their school education, that's preparing our kids for their 21<sup>st</sup>-century lives" (p. 44). The necessity for appropriate, effective youth leadership development has never been more necessary.

As students leave high schools across the country, the question for all of us becomes: Will they succeed? Over time various youth programs have attempted to define what the dimensions for success are and set the bar for leadership development, thus preparing our youth for what lies ahead. In 2010, I conducted a research study in Wisconsin to study the lasting effects of one such program, the Wisconsin Association of School Councils (WASC) Leadership Camp.

### Lasting Impact

This ten-year longitudinal study analyzed whether or not WASC Leadership Camp succeeded in

Respondents to the survey felt that they left the camp experience with all ten of the WASC Leadership Standards embedded in their development.

providing students the leadership skills necessary to be successful in their lives as students and in their future careers. It also gauged whether or not the program itself included the three facets of effective leadership development as determined by an extensive review of literature.

It was clear through this study that participation in WASC Leadership Camp did impact the lives of its camp participants. It did this through skill development, mentorship, and engaging activities. The research found the lasting effects of participa-

tion in WASC Leadership Camp to be positive, especially regarding how participation in Leadership Camp develops leadership skills. The research also indicated that the WASC Leadership Standards are clearly being taught and developed during the Leadership Camp process. Respondents to the survey felt that they left the camp experience with all ten of the WASC Leadership Standards embedded in their development. The research indicated that the WASC Leadership Standards were noticeably being taught and developed during the Leadership Camp process, producing percentages of survey

participants responding nearly 100% with combined (*agree*) and (*strongly agree*) status. Camp participants' perception was that they strongly agreed that they would not be where they were today, both professionally and emotionally, without participation in WASC Leadership Camp and that WASC Leadership Camp made a significant difference in their lives. This difference was reflected in their professional lives and personal character. Figure 1 reflects a portion of this data.

Figure 1. Lasting Impact Chart

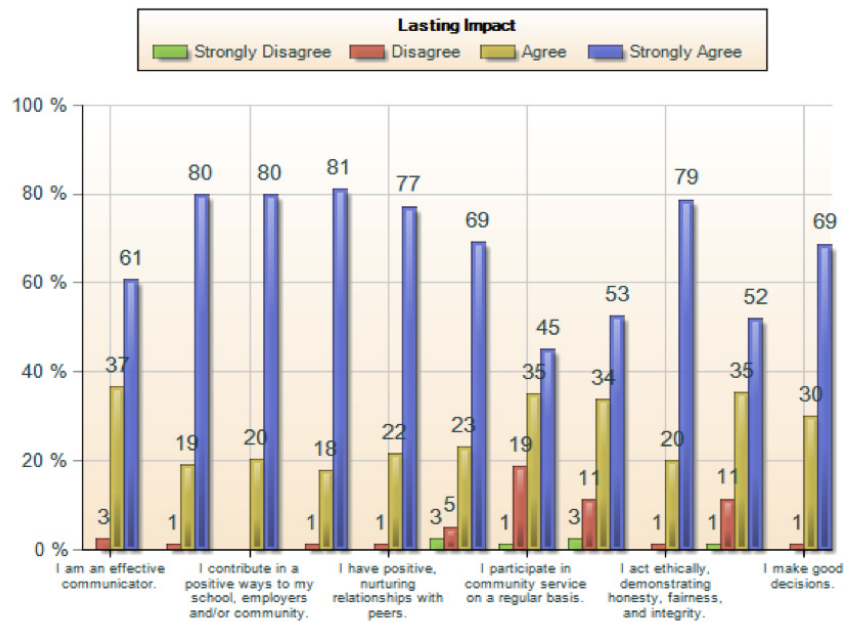
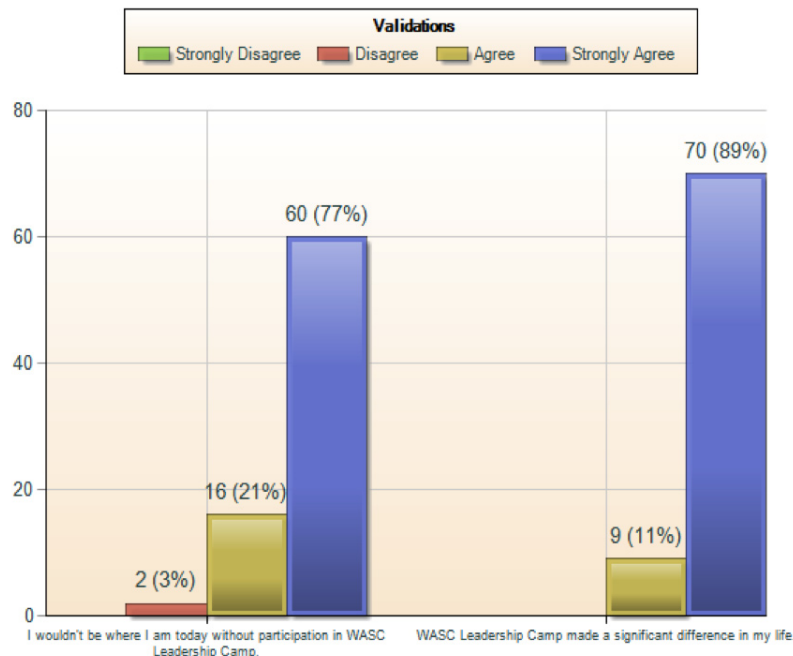


Figure 2. Validations



As indicated in Figure 2, it was clear that there was an impact on delegates' lives as a result of participation in the camp process.

Follow-up interviews with camp participants took this statistical data to the next level. When asked how WASC Leadership Camp made a significant difference in their life, Interviewee (5), a 2009 camp participant, stated, "Every

summer I go to camp and hit the big reset button. In the school year I often forget how to be a leader and at camp I come out a better person every year.” Interviewee (4), a 2004 camp delegate and business manager, shared, “WASC Leadership Camp changed my life. The skills I learned I’m still using today.” Interviewee (3), a 2004 camp delegate and residence hall coordinator, shared, “All of those individual leadership skills I learned at camp singlehandedly have given me the job I have today. It has definitely had a large impact on my life.” Interviewee (1), a 1999 camp delegate stated, “I was going through a rough transitional period in high school, and camp really tried to steer me into a direction that I wanted to go but didn’t know how to get there. I wish that everyone had the same experience as me.” Interviewee (2), a 1999 camp delegate voiced, “It was the single most important experience in my life for developing my personality. It allowed me the experience to be the best person I could and established my identity as an individual in a positive way.”

Figure 3 shows that according to a report by Edwards (2009) with the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of persons age 25 or older attaining a bachelor’s degree has recently reached an all time high of 17.2%. Those attaining a graduate or other professional degree increased to 9.9%. In Wisconsin specifically, the numbers were 25.4 % of persons age 25 or older attaining a bachelor’s degree and 7.2% of persons attaining a graduate or professional degree. Ultimately, when comparing this data to those that attended WASC Leadership Camp, statistically, those attending Leadership Camp, went on to receive a bachelor’s degree 50.8% more often than their national counterparts and 42.6% more than their counterparts in Wisconsin.

### Key Components

The research also indicated that the three key components to an effective leadership program, active participation, skills development, and mentors and relationships, are embedded in WASC Leadership Camp. It was clear that these components were at the foundation of the WASC Leadership Camp experience and assisted in the development of each participant.

In a society bombarded with endless literature and dialogue centered on the importance of test scores and knowledge acquisition and how these facets of the educational landscape dictate the journey educational leaders are pushed to take, I was pleased

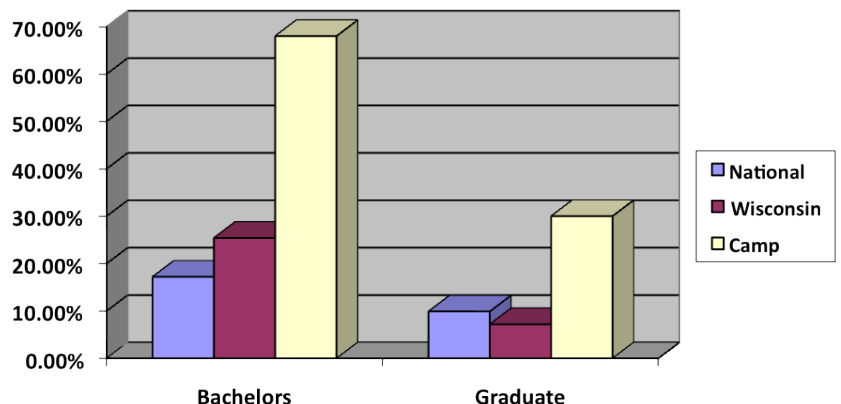
through this study to once again revisit the foundation for an effective educational journey for the future. Yes, this journey must include standards, benchmarks, and skill development, but it must also be balanced with active engagement and mentorship. The future of our young leaders depends on it.

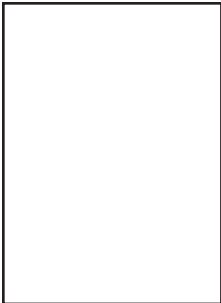
A plethora of organizations have sponsored and conducted youth leadership development programs and experiences for a wide array of students. Most of these experiences have been planned without identifiable reference to published leadership research studies. They characteristically have been organized around materials utilized by other youth development programs or simply based on the judgments and perceptions of staff members. In 1970, Earl Reum shared this same message as a part of his doctoral study researching the effectiveness of such programs. Reum (1970) stated, “The youth leadership development arena has provided our society an instrument for youth engagement, a technique for change, methods of providing students with genuine relevance, if the school will allow the potential of self-determination which activities have provided” (p.121). What was apparent then remains still today. Youth leadership development programs are necessary to develop skills in young people and guide their path into the next century. Their role remains urgent. Their time remains crucial.

Validating these youth programs is as necessary as having them readily available for young people. The message remains timeless. It is my hope that this study continues the legacy once established by Reum and encourages not only the validation of other youth leadership development programs but the continued vigilance needed to keep these programs vibrant and available for young people today and in the future.

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Figure 3. Post-Secondary Education Completion by State and National and Camp





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