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After observing activities at leadership workshops in four states, Alliance member Bryan Shelly, assistant professor at Wake Forest University, concludes that among the civic skills taught in these programs the twin pillars of workshops' instruction match two points scholars have found contribute to young people's empowerment.

Summer Workshops Stress Civic Skills

By Dr. Bryan Shelly

One of the programs of which many state student council organizations are most proud is their summer workshops. These workshops bring together students from across each state to a college campus for a week of instruction and activities designed to teach the fundamentals of leadership and make students more effective and energetic leaders in their schools.

Advocates of these workshops often talk about the "magic" of these experiences but have a hard time describing what this magic is. As the assistant director of one of the Pennsylvania Association of Student Council's (PASC) high school workshops, I have experienced this frustration all too often, so in the summer of 2008 I went to workshops in Louisiana, Missouri, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania to study the civic skills they try to teach. While at the workshops I followed high-school delegates through their meetings, activities, and lessons and interviewed staff members. I found that workshops teach student empowerment through a focus on numerous skills, but that the two traits the workshops most encouraged were a delegate's sense of agency and understanding of the value of diverse communities. Social scientists from multiple fields have found that students with these traits show positive outcomes across a host of desired outcomes.

Before discussing the results, I should note that my position with PASC opens up legitimate concerns that my findings are biased. Without reservation, I count myself as one of the advocates discussed above. However, the results I discuss here are explored in much greater detail in an article slated to appear in a 2011 issue of *Journal of Political Science Education*. That a peer-reviewed journal accepted my article suggests that other scholars are confident that my findings meet conventional standards of objectivity. All results reported from PASC's workshop are the observations of my research assistant, not me.

All four workshops made sure that students learned specific skills, such as public speaking, how to run a meeting, and goal setting, they would need to be effective student leaders in their schools. The workshops also regarded empowerment as a general psychological trait and saw building a delegate's sense of agency as perhaps their most important goal. Most instruction took place in small, delegate-driven groups, so that the high school delegates could plan and execute most of the activities. For example, all four workshops asked each small group to design a banner for a competition against all other groups. Staff members were present only to ensure safety and provide the guidelines to structure the activity. When interviewed, most staff members agreed with the Missouri staffer who said, "It's their week. It's not my role to be in front of the group." Staff members believed that removing themselves from planning taught students how much they could accomplish on their own, without an adult driving the project.

The problem in modern high schools towards which workshops most frequently pointed delegates was the alienation and isolation that many high school students feel. All workshops stressed the need for, and ability of, the delegates to strive to include students who do not "fit in" and the value in building teams with a diverse array of people and skills. All four workshops staged a Leadership Carnival, where all delegates were divided into teams and competed in a series of events such as building a house using the most playing cards, figuring out the most ways to find exactly 5/8 a cup of water using only a 1/4, 1/3, and 1/2 measuring cups, and correctly identifying all 32 National Football League teams from a series of odd word clues. Inevitably, the groups that did the best were those with young people with different talents that let the most capable person at a given activity coordinate the group's efforts on that activity. In discussions after the activity, staff members described how this situation was similar to their schools and how student organizations would

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work better if they made a place for students that may not fit the traditional "student leader" profile but had computer, arts, and other skills that help a group succeed.

The twin pillars of workshops' instruction match two points scholars have found contribute to young people's empowerment. Effective people believe in their power to achieve their desired end and have the autonomy to do so in a manner of their choosing (Kreisberg 1992; Spreitzer, Kizilos, and Nason 1997). Kreisberg also stresses the importance of "power-with" others, where individuals work together for their mutual benefit. In order for individuals to work together in such a productive fashion, groups must exhibit an openness to the needs of all of their members, which necessitates an embrace of diverse backgrounds and talents (Sprague and Hayes 2000).

In many states, these summer workshops are open to student leaders from organizations other than student council. If you want your students to experience what Dr. Earl Reum calls "the learning experience of a lifetime," contact your state student council organization and ask about summer workshops.



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This article contains excerpts from Shelly, Bryan. 2011. "Bonding, Bridging, and Boundary Breaking: the Civic Lessons of High School Student Activities." *Journal of Political Science Education*.

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