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Analyzing Leadership Opportunities through Participant Perspective

University Honors Program Thesis

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Submitted by

Cathryn Yaggie Heinen

May 2020

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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
HONORS THESIS/PROJECT/CREATIVE ACTIVITY ABSTRACT

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ABSTRACT OF THESIS:

The Anatomy Academic Assistant (AAA) practicum is a peer-mentoring program that helps participants further develop leadership skills. The goal of this research was to analyze leadership qualities through participant perspective and analyze the effectiveness of the AAA practicum in enhancing these leadership qualities. A 25-question survey, measuring participant perspective, was designed to include both rating-scale questions and free response questions. Rating-scale questions used a Likert scale with a corresponding assigned value. Free response questions also provided qualitative data that was grouped into overarching themes in a generated word cloud. The assigned value averages showed that participants largely agreed with the questions, it was simply the degree to which they agree varied on an individual basis. Participants “agreed” that the AAA practicum developed skills like decision-making, accountability and integrity, confidence, and leadership. Additionally, participants responded that the AAA practicum needed to improve communication, teamwork, and organization. In future surveys, more leadership skills should be evaluated, and better definitions of leadership skills should be provided.

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Introduction

Leadership is a quality that is difficult to define. Traditionally, leadership has been associated strongly with high-ranking positions in business, rewarded by promotions and bonuses, rather than seen through everyday life occurrences. However, it can be argued that leadership comes in many forms; getting tasks accomplished, being decisive and efficient, and ensuring the success of a team as a whole, to name a few.

The ability to direct and guide a group of people is a key facet in leadership, and these fundamentals exist not only within traditional business settings but also in all levels of education. It starts with being the line leader in Kindergarten, running for student council in high school, to earning a TA-ship in a graduate program. Even within communities, organizations such as 4-H, Scouts, and Youth Sports teams, programming calls for these skills to be developed and employed. In academia, leadership positions are highly sought after because they provide experience and practice within the areas of time-management, facilitation, and accountability, all skills necessary in both academic arenas and everyday life.

This paper focuses primarily on how undergraduate students view their leadership skills when serving as peer-mentors. The point of these opportunities is to enhance leadership and professional skills for participants. However, measuring and assessing leadership remains elusive due to the lack of an objective method to measure leadership and professional skills. Surveys tend to be a popular model of evaluation, as researchers can analyze leadership from a participant perspective.

The University of Nebraska (UNO) Anatomy Academic Assistant (AAA) Practicum is a leadership opportunity for undergraduate students. Students who have taken Anatomy and

Physiology I and II, and who have performed well are selected to serve as peer-mentors for Anatomy and Physiology students the following year. This practicum gives AAAs experience in many ways: assisting in teaching laboratory material, hosting open labs, and creating study material to aid in student comprehension. Open labs are laboratory sessions open to students taking Anatomy and Physiology I and II that are directed by AAAs. The AAAs are responsible for answering questions about material and also provide advice on study methods. These labs are independently run by AAAs and are held once a week for an hour. AAAs are also involved in volunteer activities within the Omaha community, as well as coordinating large-scale activities hosted for all students in Anatomy and Physiology.

A study by Chung and Pearsonette explains leadership at many different levels. It mentions opportunities like 4-H that encourage youth development through the direction of adult mentors. Community clubs, camp programs, afterschool programs, and classroom programs are also designed to bolster leadership skills (Chung & Personette, 2019). In 4-H specifically, a three-step model is used to help students apply the leadership skills that they have developed. This process is threefold: *Experience* the activity, *reflect* upon the activity, and finally, *apply* the common themes learned in the activity to everyday life and new situations (Chung & Personette, 2019). If a student implements the leadership skills learned early on, there is a chance that they would be interested in other leadership opportunities as they get older. Perhaps this could include a “professional” leader identity; a role developed through activities that are of esteemed position (Chung & Personette, 2019). Additionally, this could include, “teaching, mentorship, research, presentations, and decision-making,” (Chung & Personette, 2019). These roles are vital not only in experiencing a leadership position but also for testing the skills that a leader has honed and adding new skills to their toolbelt. For an opportunity like conducting research, there are specific

roles that are recommended to enhance the identity of a leader. These roles include, “[assisting] program/campus researchers in leadership development research and [conducting] small research projects under direct supervision,” (Chung & Personette, 2019). If a student prefers a facilitator role to a researcher role, activities could include planning lessons for peers, designing and leading activities at various events, coordinating with additional programs, or participating in workshop development with supervisors, all while facilitating discussions (Chung & Personette, 2019). Mentorship is great way to experience leading. Establishing meetings, guiding youth or peers, and providing constructive feedback, are great opportunities to grow leadership skills (Chung & Personette, 2019).

In an attempt to assess leadership skills, a study was conducted to, “evaluate the outcomes of a peer-mentoring program designed for graduate occupational therapy students,” (Gafni Lachter & Ruland, 2018). The point of this study was to measure the outcome of their peer-mentoring program. The AAA practicum exhibits many similar qualities. This study contains faculty-led group activities, meetings with students, and focuses on professional and leadership skills (Gafni Lachter, & Ruland, 2018) Leadership was measured specifically, by implementing the Multi-factor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) as well as a survey with open-ended feedback (Gafni Lachter & Ruland, 2018). Researchers found that peer-mentors perceived skills like the opportunity to help students, form relationships with the students, and enable students to better themselves, as important (Gafni Lachter & Ruland, 2018). Additionally, students also reported that they received high value from the peer-mentoring itself (Gafni Lachter & Ruland, 2018). Based on this study, those participating in the AAA practicum would largely benefit by enhancing both leadership skills and their network establishment.

While there are many opportunities to lead in the AAA practicum, the AAA response was utilized to evaluate where AAAs felt they grew in leadership skills. They largely agreed that the program and its opportunities were beneficial, especially in the areas of communication, leadership, and public speaking. The many leadership opportunities provided within the program were ranked to see what type of program changes could help increase participants' leadership qualities. Collecting data on program changes and the suggested additions may allow for an increase in favorably reported leadership qualities in the future.

The goal of this research is twofold: One, evaluate whether being a peer mentor in the Anatomy Academic Program will increase participant perspective of their leadership skills. And two, collect responses on recommended changes and additions that can increase leadership opportunities for AAAs.

Materials and Methods

Survey Design

To analyze leadership skills from a participant perspective, as well as potential improvements to the AAA program, a survey was implemented. The survey included 25 questions in total. These 25 questions can be subdivided into 9 questions regarding leadership qualities and 16 questions regarding program improvements to increase leadership opportunities for AAAs. Questions regarding leadership qualities are listed in Table 1 and questions regarding program improvements are listed in Table 2.

Survey questions involving both leadership qualities and program improvements allowed for the most applicable data to be collected. Leadership questions (Table 1) were based on

literature that “suggested interpersonal skills, oral communication, written communication, administrative/management skills, problem-solving skills, decision making, and organizing and planning as important antecedents to effective leadership” (Hoffman, 2011). Questions 2-8 (Table 1) specifically analyze these themes. Questions 10-25 were asked to analyze the practicum itself, and how it can be improved to offer a better leadership opportunity (Table 2). The free-response questions regarding program improvements offered participants the opportunity to suggest changes to existing practicum procedures. The free-response questions also allowed participants to suggest novel program additions.

Question 1	The teaching opportunities directed by AAAS benefited the AAA:
Question 2	The AAA position has improved my decision-making capabilities:
Question 3	The AAA position has improved my confidence:
Question 4	The AAA position has improved leadership qualities:
Question 5	The AAA position has improved my integrity and accountability:
Question 6	The AAA position has improved my commitment:
Question 7	The AAA position has improved my communication skills:
Question 8	The AAA position has increased my delegation skills:
Question 9	Please name three skills that the AAA experience enhanced:

Table 1: Questions 1-9 include leadership themes. Questions 1-8 are based on a Likert scale while question 9 is a free response question.

Question 10	The AAA position has made me more knowledgeable about Anatomy and Physiology:
Question 11	The AAA position has helped students do better in the class:
Question 12	The teaching opportunities directed by AAAs benefited the class:
Question 13	What would you change to increase the effectiveness of AAAs in the classroom?
Question 14	What would you add that would increase the effectiveness of AAAs in the classroom?
Question 15	Please name three skills that need additional focus within the AAA experience:
Question 16	Do you feel that you were adequately prepared to become an AAA?
Question 17	Were expectations made clear about the AAA position?
Question 18*	Do you feel you were held accountable during your time as an AAA?
Question 19*	Did you feel there was adequate support from professors?
Question 20	What changes would you make to improve the clarity of the AAA position?
Question 21	Overall, how did the AAA experience benefit you?
Question 22	What challenged you in the AAA experience?
Question 23	What about the AAA experience did you find easy?
Question 24	Please list three short-term improvements to the AAA program:
Question 25	Please list three long-term improvements to the AAA program:

Table 2: Questions 10-25 investigate what aspects of the AAA program can be improved in order to increase leadership opportunities for participants.

The survey was designed so participants could anonymously participate. The anonymity of the responses gave participants permission to be honest and transparent with their feedback. Qualtrics, the survey software, allowed flexibility within survey options and a remote format so participants could complete the survey at their convenience. The survey was administered through a secure link posted on the AAA Practicum online course page. The link was up for three weeks and collected responses during that time period. There were 11 total responses to the survey.

Data Analysis for Rating Scale Questions

After the responses were collected, the data was recorded through Qualtrics and exported to Excel for analysis. Once imported into Excel, worded responses were converted into their assigned value based on a Likert scale. Participants responded to the survey with a word, like “strongly agree” or “strongly disagree.” After the response was gathered, values were assigned to these responses (Table 3 and Table 4). After all responses were recorded and assigned values, the averages for each question’s responses were generated; higher averages indicate stronger agreement with the statement presented in the question, and lower averages indicate lower agreement.

Likert scales were utilized to analyze the rating scale questions presented in the survey. Questions 1-8, 10-12, 16, and 19 use the seven-point Likert scale (Table 3). However, for questions 17 and 18, a five-point scale was used, because a yes-no scale was more appropriate than an agree-disagree scale (Table 4).

Assigned Value	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Likert Scale	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Somewhat disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat agree	Agree	Strongly agree

Table 3: Likert scale used for all rating scale questions except question 18 and 19. The above figure shows the numerical values assigned to worded answers.

Assigned Value	1	2	3	4	5
Likert Scale	Definitely not	Probably not	Might or might not	Probably yes	Definitely yes

Table 4: Likert scale used for rating scale questions 18 and 19. The table above shows the assigned values generated from Likert scale responses.

Data Analysis for Free Response Questions

Free response questions did not have assigned values like the multiple-choice questions. Some participant responses to the free response questions were in paragraph form while others were simply one-worded answers. In order to accommodate different response formats, common themes were generated. To visualize these common themes, word clouds were generated using the WordItOut website (WordItOut, 2020). Question responses were added to the word clouds and graphics were generated (Figure 2 and Figure 4). In these graphics, words appear larger than others and are different colors of blue; larger words in the lightest color blue font represent responses that were reported more frequently than smaller, darker blue, words.

Results

Leadership Skills

The AAA practicum survey had a total of 11 AAAs voluntarily participate. Leadership qualities are measured in questions 1-9. Questions 1-8 are shown in Figure 1 and are rating scale questions measured via a seven-point Likert-scale in the survey (Table 3). Following analysis, these questions had an assigned value average of 5.0 or greater. This indicates that at minimum, participants “somewhat agreed” that the AAA practicum improved participants’ teaching, decision-making, confidence, leadership qualities, integrity, commitment, communication skills, and delegation skills (Figure 1). Survey participants also indicated a higher degree of agreement than “somewhat agree” for some of these qualities (Figure 1).

More specifically, questions 2 and 3, which related to decision-making and confidence, had the highest question assigned value averages of 5.8 and 6.1, respectively, indicating the survey participants had a high level of agreement with these questions (Figure 1). Questions 4-6 involved leadership qualities, integrity and accountability, and commitment, resulted in high assigned value averages of 5.7 (Figure 1), indicating that participants “agreed” with these statements. Question 1 had the lowest assigned value average of 4.8 (Figure 1). This question asked respondents if they agreed that the teaching opportunities directed by AAAs benefited AAAs, and while this still had a higher than neutral rating at “somewhat agree,” it remained the lowest assigned value average of all questions. Question 9 is the only free response question associated with leadership qualities, and asked participants to name three skills that the AAA practicum enhanced. Common responses are represented by the word cloud generated in Figure 2, and it can be concluded that participants think that the AAA program increased their public

speaking, leadership, confidence, and communication skills. While these were the most frequently reported qualities, there are additional leadership qualities like networking and flexibility that were also reported (Figure 2).

Program Improvements

Questions 10-25 specifically analyze the potential for program improvement (Table 2). Questions 10-12 and 16-19 are the rating scale questions measured via a 5-point Likert-scale in the survey (Table 2). Questions 10 and 11 had an assigned value average of 6.3, which is the highest for any question in this grouping (Figure 3). These averages indicate agreement between the “agree” and “strongly agree” options. These questions specifically ask if the AAA position made AAAs more knowledgeable about anatomy and physiology and if their role helped students to do better in the class (Table 2). Questions 12 and 16 had an assigned value average of 6.0 (Figure 2), which indicates that survey participants “agree” that the teaching opportunities directed by AAAs benefitted the class and that AAAs felt adequately prepared to become an AAA (Table 2). Question 17 asked if the AAAs felt that the expectations about the AAA practicum were made clear or not (Table 2). This question received a lower rating than the others with an assigned value average of 5.4 (Figure 2), however, this is not a low score by any means. This simply indicated that the assigned value given to this question is associated with “somewhat agree” (Table 3).

Questions 18 and 19 are on a five-point Likert scale rather than a seven-point Likert scale (Table 4), and so assigned value averages for these questions are out of 5 rather than 7. Question 18 asked if AAA felt that they were held accountable during their practicum and question 19 asked if there was adequate support from professors (Table 2). Question 18 generated an average

assigned value score of 4.0, which corresponds with a “probably yes” agreement, and question 19 had a score of 4.2 (Figure 3).

The free-response questions are qualitative, but still valuable to gather information on program changes and additions that would improve the AAA program and increase leadership opportunities for participants (Table 2). Question 13 asked respondents about changes AAAs would like to see to increase the effectiveness of AAAs in the classroom, and the most common suggested changes in the AAA practicum were additional activities for AAAs to plan and execute in class, additional prep materials and curriculum available, and more personal connections with students. For question 14, which asked what AAAs would add to the AAA practicum, the most common suggested additions included additional weekend and late-night open lab times and open lab formats hosted online. The addition of a peer-advising opportunity, a newsletter, additional announcements for AAAs, and specializing the AAAs to give them a unique positions in the lab were also suggested.

Question 15 is another free-response question that specifically analyzes three skills that need additional focus within the AAA practicum (Table 2). The word cloud generated from the responses to question 15 indicated that communication is the most commonly listed skill that needs additional focus in the AAA program (Figure 4). Teamwork, organization, and speaking skills were listed less frequently, but are also important skills in need of additional focus.

Question 20 asked what changes can be made to improve the clarity of the AAA position (Table 2). The main suggested changes that were reported in this question include additional guidelines, structure, and expectations. Participants also requested additional preparation for AAAs before the various class periods and units. Communication between professors and AAAs,

along with guidance and support from instructors were also requested in order to improve the clarity of the position.

The last five free response questions (21-25) were used to gauge the benefits, challenges, and program improvements that were reported by the survey participants (Table 2). Question 21 asked how the AAA practicum specifically benefitted the AAA taking the survey. More complete knowledge was an overwhelming answer to this question, followed by improved leadership skills, as well as more confidence in teaching, speaking, and communicating, and also the maintenance of professional relationships with professors. Question 22 asked what was challenging in the practicum and this question was met with a myriad of responses: an increased workload, unclear expectations, recalling material, speaking/teaching in class, and the disconnect between wanting success for mentored students and the students wanting success for themselves. Question 23 is the opposite of question 22 and asks what was easy in the AAA practicum (Table 2). Many respondents said that attending open labs, meetings, and lab sessions was an easy commitment. Other popular answers were making connections, relationship-building, communication, preparation, recalling information, and answering questions for students.

Lastly, questions 24 and 25 focused on the future of the program. Question 24 asked for three short-term solutions that could be implemented in the AAA practicum (Table 2). There were a wide variety of answers to question 24, but some of the most common answers for short-term solutions included more organization in meetings and labs, better communication regarding weekly labs and meetings, and a variety of open-lab settings. Additionally, AAAs would like to see set rules and expectations for the AAA practicum, more support for coordination activities, AAAs taking on a bigger role in the lab, and the addition of knowledge-checks for students. Question 25 asked for three long-term improvements to the AAA practicum. Some frequent

responses included introducing a peer advising opportunity for AAAs, the potential for doing or viewing a cadaver dissection, and limiting the cost of enrolling in the AAA practicum.

Additionally, AAAs mentioned changes in open lab format, a movement toward a more personal connection with students via small groups, AAAs taking on lecture topics, a room remodel, and better communication and work distribution.

Discussion

Leadership Qualities

Based on participant perspective, there are many leadership benefits to the Anatomy Academic Assistant Practicum. Figure 1 and figure 4 show how these benefits are agreed upon differently by participants. A perfectly neutral score on the seven-point Likert scale would be 4.0. Every question evaluated on this scale had a minimum of a 5.0 assigned value average which translates to a participant reporting an agreement of “somewhat agree” average for every question (Figure 1 and Figure 3 and Table 3). On a five-point Likert scale, neutral would be 3.0. Questions 18 and 19 use a 5-point scale and had assigned value average score around 4.0, which correlates to a “probably yes” on the Likert scale (Figure 3 and Table 4). Participant responses are more agreeable than a neutral response for every rating scale question (Figures 1 and 3) indicating that participants viewed the practicum and the leadership skills developed as valuable.

Participants in the AAA practicum reported that decision-making skills, confidence, public speaking, and leadership skills in general were improved throughout the practicum (Figure 1). Other leadership skills such as flexibility, networking, and teaching skills, may need additional focus in the AAA program. These leadership skills were reported infrequently as skills

that were enhanced through the AAA practicum (Figure 2). It could be beneficial to include these infrequently listed strengths in a future survey and evaluate them via a rating scale question.

Participant responses to question 9, which asks which skills the AAA practicum improved, has some answers that overlap with responses for question 15, which asks which skills need additional focus within the AAA practicum (Figures 2 and 4). Communication was a common response with regard to skills that improved and also skills that need additional focus. However, it is unclear what is meant by “communication”. Communication could be lacking between faculty and AAAs, between the whole AAA team, or even between students and the AAAs. It may be beneficial to analyze communication through all three of those perspectives in order to understand where the communication needs improvement.

Program Improvements

Program additions and changes would help the program better facilitate the improvement of leadership skills. Question 17 asked participants if expectations were made clear during the AAA practicum (Table 2), and with an assigned value average of 5.4, this question had one of the lowest scores in the survey (Figure 3). Developing a clearly communicated set of expectations also was a response to question 22 which asks about the challenges of the AAA practicum (Table 2). Question 24 asked participants to list 3 short-term program improvements, and survey participants responded that a set of clearly outlined set of rules and expectations would be a welcome improvement. There is clear feedback that expectations are something that needs to be addressed in the AAA practicum.

Communication, teamwork, responsibility, accountability, and preparation were all listed as short-term improvements (Figure 4). Communication is discussed in the leadership qualities

section above. Teamwork and accountability could be dependent on one another, as a lack of accountability may dissolve teamwork. Responsibility could be improved by addressing and improving accountability. If AAAs are held accountable for both the good things they do, along with the areas in which they need improvement, then responsibility would be improved.

Preparation was also listed as a short-term improvement, but the use of the term is also unclear, similar to communication. Preparation is another unclear area similar to communication. If preparation needs improvements, that could mean that AAAs need to prepare more, or it could mean that the faculty need to prepare the AAAs more. There is a lot of preparation involved in the AAA practicum, so additional questions need to be posed to understand what is meant by “prepare” and to determine in what facet (open labs, classrooms, meetings, etc.) preparation is necessary.

Future Directions

Additional clarification and research are necessary for the AAA practicum to increase leadership skills in the participants. The final questions, 24 and 25, ask AAAs to provide solutions that would improve the program (Table 2). While these are certainly modeled after individual experiences, perspectives are necessary from all AAAs to provide complete improvements. The most common short-term improvements listed were more autonomous AAA involvement, more program structure and accountability, and better communication between AAAs and professors. These program improvements are considered short term, as there are not any major barriers, like finances or redesign, that would prevent implementation. The most common long-term improvements listed provide more variety of open lab settings, the introduction of a peer anatomy advising program, and facility and program improvements, like a cadaver lab or room remodel.

The addition of a peer-advising program could help current students taking Anatomy and Physiology increase their leadership skills and may aid in their career search. Many AAAs have experience working, volunteering, or conducting research, so it would be beneficial to share these experiences with current students taking Anatomy and Physiology I or II. Research by Gafni Lachter & Ruland specifically states that “it is recommended to consider student peer-mentoring to empower them to practice and advance essential career skills from the initial stages of professional development... peer-mentoring programs can promote leadership development and [the] establishment of networks...” (2018). Professional skills and leadership skills go hand in hand, and so the students, along with the AAAs, would both benefit from the introduction of a peer-advising program. The outline for this peer-mentorship program was made available in their research so that others may implement a peer-advising program in their own settings, (Gafni Lachter & Ruland, 2018). This program outline could produce additional beneficial changes to the AAA practicum.

There were many recommendations for AAAs to have a specialized role in the classroom. In the Chung and Pearsonette program, the students “are responsible for the selection of students, logistics of programming, office hours, and facilitation of their respective programs” (Chung & Pearsonette, 2019). In addition, these students undergo two major trainings per semester and work specifically on leadership skills during training (Chung & Pearsonette, 2019). If the AAA program implemented special training for AAAs, it may provide education so that the AAAs could take on a larger role, such as a facilitation role. AAAs could develop a specialized role in a classroom setting, such as providing topical sessions for students or even having a role in the lecture, rather than just the lab.

In the future, this survey should be improved by studying either the program improvements to increase leadership in the AAA practicum, or the leadership qualities themselves. In future surveys, leadership skills mentioned in free response questions should be added as rating scale questions. Individual leadership skills like communication and preparation should be better defined. It may be beneficial to conduct a survey about the leadership skills after the first semester so AAAs would have experience leading. Another survey analyzing how additions and changes could be made in the AAA practicum to increase the leadership skills previously reported. This would provide an opportunity for trial periods of implemented program changes. All in all, this study was successful and provided many unique viewpoints and will allow the AAA practicum to improve in the future.

Figures and Tables:

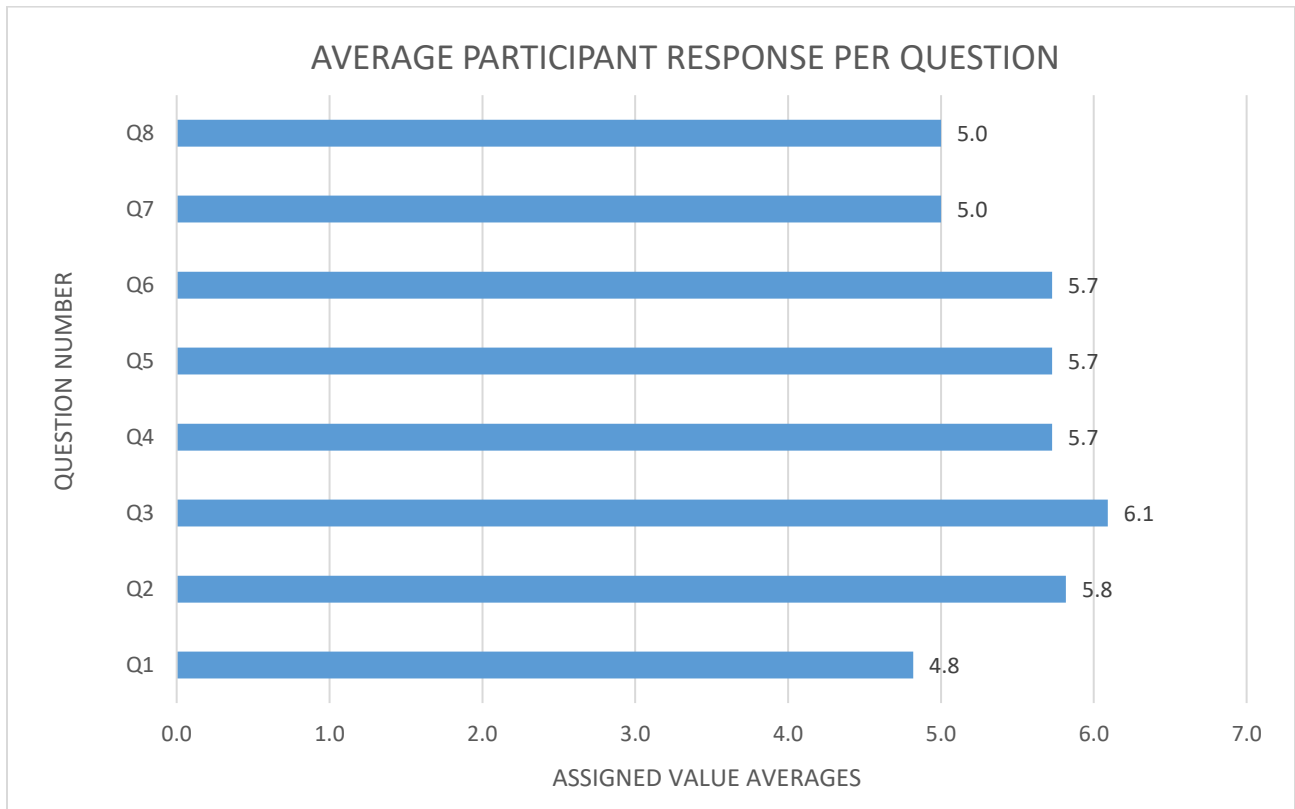


Figure 1: Assigned value averages for questions 1-8, regarding leadership qualities, are shown above. Higher averages indicate stronger agreement while lower averages indicate lower agreement.



Figure 2: The image above represents the answers to question 9. This question asks which skills the AAA practicum improved during their time as AAAs.

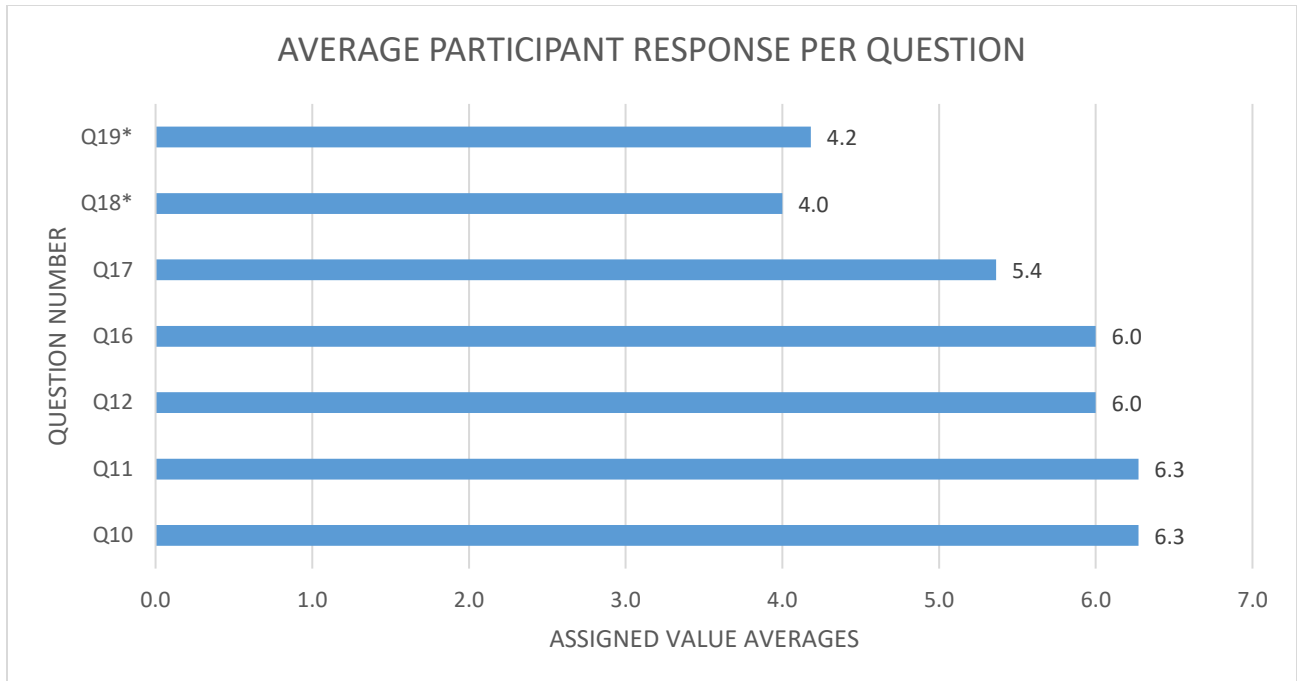


Figure 3: Assigned value averages for question 10-12 and 16-19, regarding program improvements, are shown above. Higher averages indicate stronger agreement while lower averages indicate weaker agreement. Questions 18 and 19 are evaluated on a five-point scale rather than a seven-point scale; the asterisk indicates this difference.



WordItOut

Figure 4: The image above represents the answers to question 15. This question asks which three skills need additional focus within the AAA practicum.

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