

Student Athlete Leadership Institute  
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Report submitted to the faculty of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science  
In  
Agriculture and Life sciences  
Concentration in Leadership Studies

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July 25, 2019

**Keywords:** Leadership, Student-athletes, Development

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this project was to determine if Virginia Tech's Leadership Institute is helping student athletes in their overall experience. Additionally, the project sought to identify which parts of the Leadership Institute are most helpful to student athletes, and which have made an impact that will help them in all aspects of life. This qualitative study consisted of face-to-face interviews to identify the development of student athletes' leadership skills. Data was collected by interviewing 10 student athletes at Virginia Tech. These student athletes participated in one or more of the Leadership Institute events sponsored by Virginia Tech. The study was guided by Social Learning Theory, which focuses on learning from one another via observation, imitation, and modeling. After research and observation, it became evident that once a great leader is developed the future leaders have mentors to teach them how to become an even better leader. After participating in the Leadership Institute, many student athletes realized what it takes to be a great leader and how to develop younger teammates into great leaders as well. Interviews revealed leadership skills that many developed by being a part of the Virginia Tech Leadership Institute.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

Athletic teams, as well as companies, pride themselves on having a culture that encompasses leadership, commitment, and communication in order to work together to achieve personal goals of being successful (Athletic Business, 2018). In order to achieve these goals, the work starts on an individual level and then moves to a team level. Each member of the team needs to know what their goals are and how they are going to achieve them. It is up to the coaches, captains, and leaders of the team to guide the team to victory. Effective team performance comes from proper fundamental characteristics identified in research (Zaccaro & Kilimoski, 2002). This study focuses on growing student athletes to become leaders of their team and to use insights from workshops to improve their student-athlete experience.

### **Background and Setting**

Virginia Tech takes pride in leadership activities available to student-athletes in order to shape their overall experience, and the curriculum is unique from other schools in the Atlantic Coast Conference. The Leadership Institute, in particular, allows student athletes to learn from mentors in the Virginia Tech athletic department. Athletes were taught they need to dive deeper into their own personalities, beliefs, and what they are passionate about before learning how to lead a team. Leadership Institute events are led by Virginia Tech sports psychologist, Dr. Bennett, and Virginia Tech student athlete development administrators, Danny White and Shelby Miller. (Please refer to brochure in Appendix D.) All three of these facilitators bring expertise with teaching courses associated with growing student-athletes as leaders on and off the field.

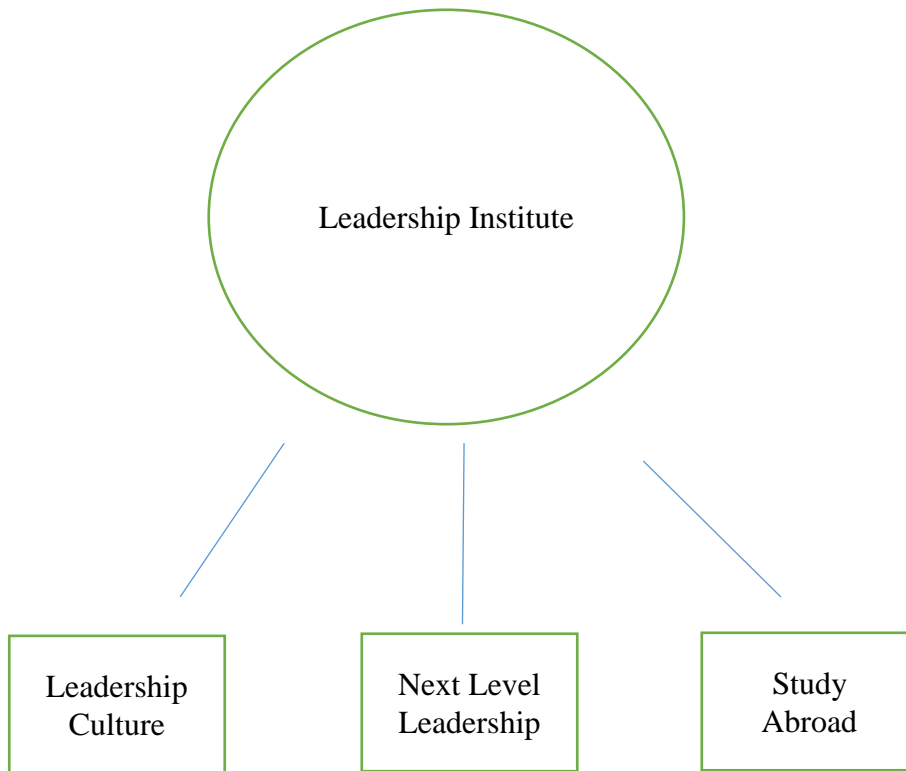
Sport Leadership Behavior is a frequently discussed topic yet could possibly be the least understood aspect of coaching (Case, 1987). Coaches are there to teach athletes the skill of the sport, yet not all coaches are skilled in leadership, which is one of the most important parts to a successful team. Leadership is possessed by a core set of four team processes: cognitive,

motivational, affective, and coordination (Zaarco, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). Leaders influence these processes by the way they carry themselves. Leaders must hold confidence in a way that their teammates will follow them. The only way to have success is to have your team on board with trusting the process, and they will see what the process produces.

The Leadership Institute consists of three events offered by the Virginia Tech Student Athlete Leadership Committee (Figure 1). The first event is Leadership Culture which is the belief that team culture can be influenced by team leaders and is designed to expose student-athletes to important concepts on leadership. As noted by Robertson (2017a):

“Tech’s approach, though, differs from most schools, which pony up tens of thousands of dollars to bring in a speaker to speak about leadership. Instead, White, Dr. Bennett and Miller focus internally and have brought in AD Whit Babcock, Deputy AD Desiree Reed-Francois, wrestling coach Kevin Dresser and former football player Jarrett Ferguson, a senior director in strength and conditioning, to speak to student-athletes.”

**Figure 1. Leadership Institute events**



The Leadership Culture series is offered each semester, during fall for freshman and spring for upperclassmen. Student-athletes learn ways to enhance their growth as leaders, with the intention of increasing their ability to lead their respective teams. The Leadership Institute’s intent is to help student athletes find ways they can grow as a leader, student, and competitor (Virginia Tech Athletics, 2019). The invited speakers are highly qualified, are well respected, and are chosen for their ability to connect with student-athletes while challenging their thoughts on leadership. Leadership Culture offers a rare chance to discuss challenges teams face with fellow student-athletes from other varsity sports in a small group setting. The sessions are geared to create a unique sense of camaraderie and an opportunity for leadership growth amongst Virginia Tech sports programs.

The next event for the Leadership Institute is the Next Level Leadership Group. This provides an opportunity for student-athletes to participate in supplemental leadership development offered outside of the ongoing programs available to all Virginia Tech student-athletes throughout the year. As student-athlete alumnus Jordan Fish shared: “The leadership development program had a huge impact on my career. I was taught how to lead myself and my teammates better and I’m a stronger, more confident leader because of it” (Virginia Tech Athletics, 2018). Next Level Leadership is a cohort of student-athletes with high interest and potential in leadership selected from a variety of varsity teams. As a member of Next Level Leadership, student-athletes engage in various leadership events throughout the year aimed at developing leadership knowledge and skills, play a key mentoring role in the Freshman Leadership Culture events, and provide insight into future leadership development programming for Virginia Tech student-athletes. “More importantly, they take on supervisory roles, overseeing the small group discussions that take place following a speaker’s presentation. This gives them hands-on experience in a leadership role” (Robertson, 2017b). An example of an activity the student athletes really enjoyed is the Enneagram personality assessment. Participants said it was cool to figure out their personality type and then work with people who they are most similar. A few goals of the Next Level Leadership Team are to identify and develop student-athletes with significant potential for leadership and influence. Another goal is to give current team leaders opportunities to mentor the freshman. The program also provides student-athletes the opportunity to shape leadership experiences within the department.

Lastly, the study abroad program was developed as part of the Leadership Institute. Due to the intense academic and athletic time demands, student-athletes rarely have the opportunity to study abroad. Since 2011, Hokies have had the chance to study abroad in multiple locations,

including the Dominican Republic, Switzerland, and Rwanda (Robertson, 2017b). The course taught (“Sports, Policy, and Society”) is geared towards those who wish to better understand how to make a positive and lasting impact on humanity (Virginia Tech, 2019). It combines on-campus learning with experimental components. Jarret Hopple (2018) shared: “The first full day we had in Rwanda we went to the Kigali Genocide Memorial which was really touching. Throughout the memorial, we heard and saw many different interviews on people’s lives before the genocide and how it has affected them.” Most of the Virginia Tech students did not have much perspective on Rwanda, but older people still remember the Rwandan genocide which was a very dark time in history (Robertson, 2017b). Whether in the Dominican Republic, Switzerland, or Rwanda, students have worked alongside local nonprofits and the highest international development policy drivers in the world, including the United States, various United Nations agencies, and the International Olympic Committee. The exposure to these policy makers and community-based organizations allows students to experience and understand sport’s global influence on society. In Rwanda, Danny White, senior associate AD for student-athlete development, oversaw the course and led a group that consisted of Virginia Tech student-athletes and athletics department staff members. Dr. Gary Bennett (sport psychologist) and Shelby Miller (coordinator of student-athlete development) aided in the two-week plunge. White led a session each day which consisted of understanding how sports aid in the development of international athletes’ communication (Robertson, 2017b). A few goals of the program are to expose students to meaningful ways sport can contribute to our global society, combine academic and experiential components focused on international development, prepare student-athletes to engage society as global citizen leaders, and, lastly, to engage in hands-on community programs with local youth.



The problem that leads me to conducting research is that we do not know if the Leadership Institute makes a difference in the athlete's experience. Similar to when leaders of an executive organization search for ways to effectively reach and motivate staff, student-athletes are always in search for ways to motivate themselves and their teammates to navigate compound and challenging environments (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). However, there is no prior research that has been done on the Virginia Tech Leadership Institute, and such information would be beneficial in helping the Institute as well as the student athletes.

### **Purpose, Research Questions, and Objectives**

The purpose of this study was to obtain valid evidence of the usefulness of the Leadership Institute. The project formed with two research questions:

- How do participants connect the Leadership Institute with their broader experience as a student athlete?
- What do participants do differently as a result of participating in the Leadership Institute?

Essentially, the study looked to see what degree student athletes' participation in the Leadership Institute extended beyond initial satisfaction. I interviewed student athletes who participated in any Leadership Institute events, asking open-ended questions that were geared towards the problem. The guiding questions sought to dig deeper into the student athlete experiences. The idea of this study was to categorize each interview question based on that perceived level of impact (reaction, learning, behavior, or result). The final objective was to report all information and data back to the Virginia Tech student athletic leadership committee so they can improve the events to benefit student athletes' overall experience.

## **Definition of Terms**

The following key terms can have a variety of interpretations. Here is how they have been defined for this project:

- **Commitment:** The state of being dedicated to a cause or activity.
- **Development:** The act of progress or growth.
- **Leadership:** The action of leading a group of people or an organization.
- **Student-Athlete:** A student athlete is a participant in an organized competitive sport sponsored by the educational institution in which he or she is enrolled.
- **Team:** A group of players forming one side in a competitive game or sport.

## **Limitations of the Project**

There are several limitations to this project. First, personal interviews present potential biases, and participants might not have been as truthful as if this was an anonymous survey where they felt they could say anything positive or negative. Because I (as researcher and interviewer) bring an inside perspective, participants may have limited themselves to only saying positive comments about the Institute. At the same time, my inside perspective could be a strength of this study, because participants may feel that I can relate since I was a part of the Leadership Institute. I made sure each participant felt welcomed and was in an environment where they felt comfortable and not vulnerable. We met in the student athlete academic services floor in Lane Stadium where each sports team's study hall is held. This was so that the participants were comfortable with the space to express their thoughts.

The second potential limitation is participants answering the questions in the way they understood. The follow-up questions were meant to frame the topic of conversation in a way that would provide as much feedback as possible, but some participants took the questions and spun

them their own way. Additionally, student athletes may have been telling me what I wanted to hear by saying all the programs were positive and great. However, all questions were open ended and allowed for the student athletes to expand upon their experiences in any way they desired.

Third, the Leadership Institute is only a few years old, which means Institute leaders are constantly altering components in efforts to improve the program. This can be a limitation because student athletes who participated in this study may have had different experiences. Also, some may not be as familiar with the content as others, which may make it hard for them to speak about some of the events in great depth.

Finally, another limitation could be the lack of variety in sports participation. Not every sport was represented in the interview process, which could inhibit some extrapolation of data due to the fact that some athletes on specific sports teams were not interviewed. On the other hand, this may not change anything.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of Literature**

Student athletes are defined by their performance on the field and off the field, their actions, and their leadership skills in order to perform in their sport and better the people around them. It is important to understand the people around you who are your influencers. They are the ones who will guide you through your decisions. Student athletes develop through their four years by using resources given to them by the athletic department and the school. They are able to better themselves through their peers by being involved in a team sport and making immediate friends the day they walk on campus. This allows them to feel comfortable and branch out by getting involved in events that will raise their leadership and social skills.

Leaders are shaped by the ones they previously followed. We choose who we want to follow based on their attitude, character, and how they overcome obstacles (Maccoby, 2004). Being a part of a team, there are many ups and downs and being able to overcome those hard times are what defines a leader. One can be appointed to a position of leadership, but no one can give the title of leadership to you; it must be given to those who are being led.

### **Development of Student-Athlete Leadership**

Understanding the influences student athlete experiences have on learning outcomes is a prevalent concern of higher education institutions. “Over the past decade, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has become increasingly concerned about the educational experience of student athletes, beyond the mere enforcement of eligibility rules and regulations” (Gayles & Hu, 2009, p. 315). Astin (1993) created a theory of student involvement that shows the individual playing a specific role in determining the growth in reference to the effort given by the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Little attention has been given to whether workshops, courses, and activities offered by institutions stimulate student leadership

(Posner, 2004). Student organizations, including athletics, have been popular with research and practitioner communities because students have the chance to work with peers (Hall, Forrester, & Borsz, 2008), an opportunity which research has shown can strengthen student learning in areas such as leadership (Astin, 1993). Students who interact with their peers in athletic activities show an increase in leadership (Dobosz & Beaty, 1999). The team captain experience may provide opportunities for students to develop leadership skills beyond what other student-athletes gain from their experiences (Grandzol, Perlis, & Draina, 2010). This role includes mentoring younger team members, structuring team activities, and being a role model to the entire team. These specific practices are important for athletes to grow into a leadership position during the four years as a student-athlete in college. Virginia Tech's Leadership Institute is an opportunity for student athletes to grow knowledge in leadership and impact their teammates both on and off the field.

### **Input-Environment-Outcome Model**

Astin's (1993) Input-Environment-Outcome model has been used to illustrate the difference in leadership between athletes and non-athletes. This theory encompasses three core concepts. The first concept is the student's input, which is their demographics, background, and any prior experiences. The next is the student's environment, which is all the experiences a student has during their time in college. Lastly, the outcome involves a student's characteristics, knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values that occur after a student has graduated college (Astin, 1984).

As an example of the Input-Environment-Output model, Huntrods and colleagues (2017) examined whether athletic participation influenced leadership development. They found participation in team sports prevented leadership growth. Athletes spend a large amount of time

devoted to their sport during competition seasons (Wolverton, 2008), which may cause academics and social life be set aside. It is possible that athletes are over-involved, which could limit them from being a key leader beyond the sports field.

Astin's theory of involvement suggests that "students learn by becoming involved" (Astin, 1985, p. 133). Astin came to this conclusion by using the pretest and posttest data from the Wabash National Study of Liberal Arts Education. As highlighted in this study, creating leadership skills is much more advanced than participating on a team. Leadership takes research, knowledge, growing, and learning individually that one does not get by just being a member of a team. By participating in the Leadership Institute and the many events that encompass it, student athletes are able to grow in ways that will influence their overall experience such as the weight room, training room, and nutrition.

### **Leadership as a Whole**

To fully encapsulate leadership, there are many more components to consider. In the book *Understanding Leadership: An Art and Humanities perspective*, McManus and Perruci (2015) argue there are many facets and traits that embody a great leader. They also state that leadership incorporates the followers, the goal, and how they are going to achieve that goal. There are subtle forms of physical presence that play a role in the way leaders present themselves and their ability to relate and motivate others. These forms include body language, facial expression, and vocalization among the many considerations that embody a great leader.

There are a number of ways teams and organizations build their leadership, both individually and as a group. The following are examples of ways that teams and companies build leadership within their environment. Teams build leadership by going on retreats at the beginning of every season to create comradery and chemistry. This also gives you a better

understanding of individuals' traits and qualities and how they like to be motivated (Brady, 2016). Another way teams build leaders is by bringing in different types of speakers, both motivational- and alumni-based. Different types of target segments give an external and experienced perspective. Not only can this positioning help with building your team, but it also helps with enhancing individuals on your team for a greater goal. This correlates back to what Huntrods and colleagues (2017) said about how it is more than just the individual's goals; it is a process.

In terms of motivating and leading an organization, there are a variety of ways to show this. Most of these scenarios are driven by the leaders and bosses of the company. They do this to help motivate individuals and groups within the organization. This will help the success of the organization in achieving their goals (Kniffin, Wansink, & Shimizu, 2014). Many companies participate in personality tests (e.g, DiSC, 2010), seminars, group activities, and team building activities to ensure everyone is working toward the greater goal of the company. These activities also help individuals grow and develop into leaders in order to drive their organization. Many studies have investigated how communication correlates to team performance (Duarte, Araujo & David, 2012). For example, a study with hospital doctors demonstrated that team training improves overall performance with surgeries and that training on a continuous basis can improve the culture of the team or organization (Forse, 2011).

### **Leadership in Sports**

Leadership has been discussed regularly but there has been a lack of consistency researching in the study of leadership in sports. The relevance of leadership theory to sports becomes extremely important when all sports teams are viewed in a formal organizational environment (Chelladurai & Saleh, 1980). Ball (1975) states that sports teams are characterized

by (a) an unequivocal identity, (b) an exact roster of members including a roster of positions or statuses, (c) a planned program of activity and a division of labor to achieve specified goals, and (d) procedures for replacing members and for transfer of members from one position to another.

Leadership is a key part of a team and can be taken on by any individual and not relied on by the coach. Coaches have other instructional duties they need to perform in order to be a coach.

### **Gaps Between Leadership and Athletes**

A common topic among the sports world is student-athletes' stress levels, which interfere with the way they perform. Weathington, Alexander, and Rodebaugh (2012) discuss the relationship between the coach and the athlete and how it is an important detriment of athlete stress and motivation levels. Due to the drastic increase in sports participation in the past few decades, more research is being done to better the athlete-coach relationship. The ability for a student to gain acceptance and status among peers outside the classroom can often be gained through excellence in sports (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006). Because the adolescent age is a time where children seek out their belonging in the classroom and on the playground, it is natural that children may be attracted to sports where they feel they fit in (Donaldson & Ronan, 2006). The relationship between an athlete and a coach is a strong reason that someone may pursue the sport. Student-athletes have a lot on their plate which is why stress is a detriment to their lives. By teaching students the leadership they need on and off the field, it allows for them to be successful in their sport and their day-to-day life.

### **Social Impact Theory**

Social Impact Theory suggests characteristics of leadership, conveyed in that leaders can be influenced by actions and motivations of other leaders (Karau, 2013). Social Impact Theory proposes that a person's experience can be influenced in a group setting only if it depends on



strength of the group, immediacy of the group, and the number of people in the group exercising social influence (Karau, 2013). The use of social media has increased tremendously as well as email and video therefore, co-workers and co-leaders are able to be reached from far away (Fotis, 2015). Leaders need to be aware that information can travel quickly and that they need to be mindful of the influences it has. In order for us to be aware of the people we are influencing, we need to be aware of the social impact we are making as well (Impact Factory, 2019).

### **Summary**

Virginia Tech Leadership Institute can use different techniques to better their student athletes. These techniques include the different leadership events that student athletes are given the opportunities to attend and gain more knowledge. The whole goal for this project is to see how we can improve the student athlete experience by encompassing all aspects of leadership. Leadership is not just the hours an athlete is on the field, it embraces day-to-day activities consisting of the training room, weight room, nutrition, social media, etc. Much goes into being a good leader on and off the field, and all of it can help a team's success.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

I chose to study the development in student athletes' leadership after they attended leadership workshops through the Leadership Institute at Virginia Tech. The Leadership Institute encompasses three different events which include: Leadership Culture, Next Level Leadership, and Study Abroad (Robertson, 2017a). This study focused on the connection between the Leadership Institute and how useful it is for student athletes' experiences as a whole. Qualitative methods were used to collect data in the form of face-to-face interviews. The interviews were framed with two primary research questions:

- (a) How do participants connect the Leadership Institute with their broader experience as a student-athlete?
- (b) What do participants do differently as a result of participating in the Leadership Institute?

### **Reflexivity Statement**

This topic is relevant to me because of the many different leadership groups that I have been a part of at Virginia Tech. I am very passionate about helping others and making sure they are well educated on leadership so they can help others and share a wealth of knowledge. I have been on teams where the leadership was lacking and the team suffered as a result. I have collected data from student athletes and was able to understand how they feel their student athlete experience is in terms of previous leadership skills through the Leadership Institute.

As a student athlete myself, I have experience in my personal leadership development, and I can relate to how much I have gained from the Leadership Institute. I am very passionate about this topic because I have been a captain for the past three years on the women's lacrosse

team, and I feel that leadership is what drives success. Having an individual or group that is leading a team takes work off of the coaches and is important in order for everyone to be aligned.

Previously, I have volunteered with many groups and events in the student athlete development office relating to leadership. I am on the Student Athlete Advisory Committee as well as on the Next Level Leadership Committee where we grow in our leadership skills and teach others how to grow as well. I have strong feelings towards this topic because of personal experience and wanting to help grow student athletes in their leadership skills.

### **Data Collection**

Qualitative data was collected by means of semi-structured, open-ended interviews, each lasting about 30 minutes. An administrator from the Leadership Institute selected student athletes for me to interview. These student athletes were selected because they attended more than one event, so they have direct experience to describe. The selector is the head of the Institute and was able to provide me with each participant's email so that I could reach out to them about participating. (See Appendix A.) The ten student athletes participating in the study included one sophomore, three juniors, four seniors, and two fifth-year seniors. The different sports represented include soccer, lacrosse, wrestling, softball, track and cross country, swimming, diving, and golf. The interview protocol allowed for the participants to share in their own words their attitudes and beliefs on leadership in the context of the Leadership Institute events.

The informed consent form (Appendix B) introduced participants to the purpose of the study, allowing them to get their minds thinking about their experiences with the Leadership Institute. The interview began with six open-ended questions, and each consisted of several follow-up questions that allowed the researcher to probe for better understanding and greater

detail. Appendix C contains the interview script, with options in the script for the interviewer (me) to ask about more information.

## **Data Analysis**

Interviews were transcribed by the researcher after the conclusion of each interview. The transcriptions were then examined to find any trends or themes that are similar relating to leadership and development. Once the recordings were transcribed and phrases examined for themes, additional quotes from the recordings were extracted to allow for the student athletes voices to be heard in the future years of the Leadership Institute.

After conducting interviews and transcriptions, I used these transcriptions for coding purposes. I coded these interviews myself using a coding technique learned in my qualitative research class. From the codes, I looked for any recurring themes in the data to sort into patterns, known as the convergence of the data (Patton, 2002). I was able to examine how data can be useful together and then looked for any differences that go together. Once repetitive themes were found, I was able to conclude my findings.

The Kirkpatrick Model was used to assess the level to which participants experienced effects of the Leadership Institute. The Kirkpatrick (2010) model presents a tiered approach, framed across four levels of evaluation:

- Level 1, Reaction: The degree in which participants find the training useful, engaging and relevant to their jobs.
- Level 2, Learning: The degree to which participants obtain the intended knowledge, skills, attitude, confidence, and commitment based on their participation in the training.
- Level 3, Behavior: The degree to which participants apply that they learned back to their job setting.

- Level 4, Results: The degree to which targeted outcomes occur as a result of the training and the support and accountability package.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

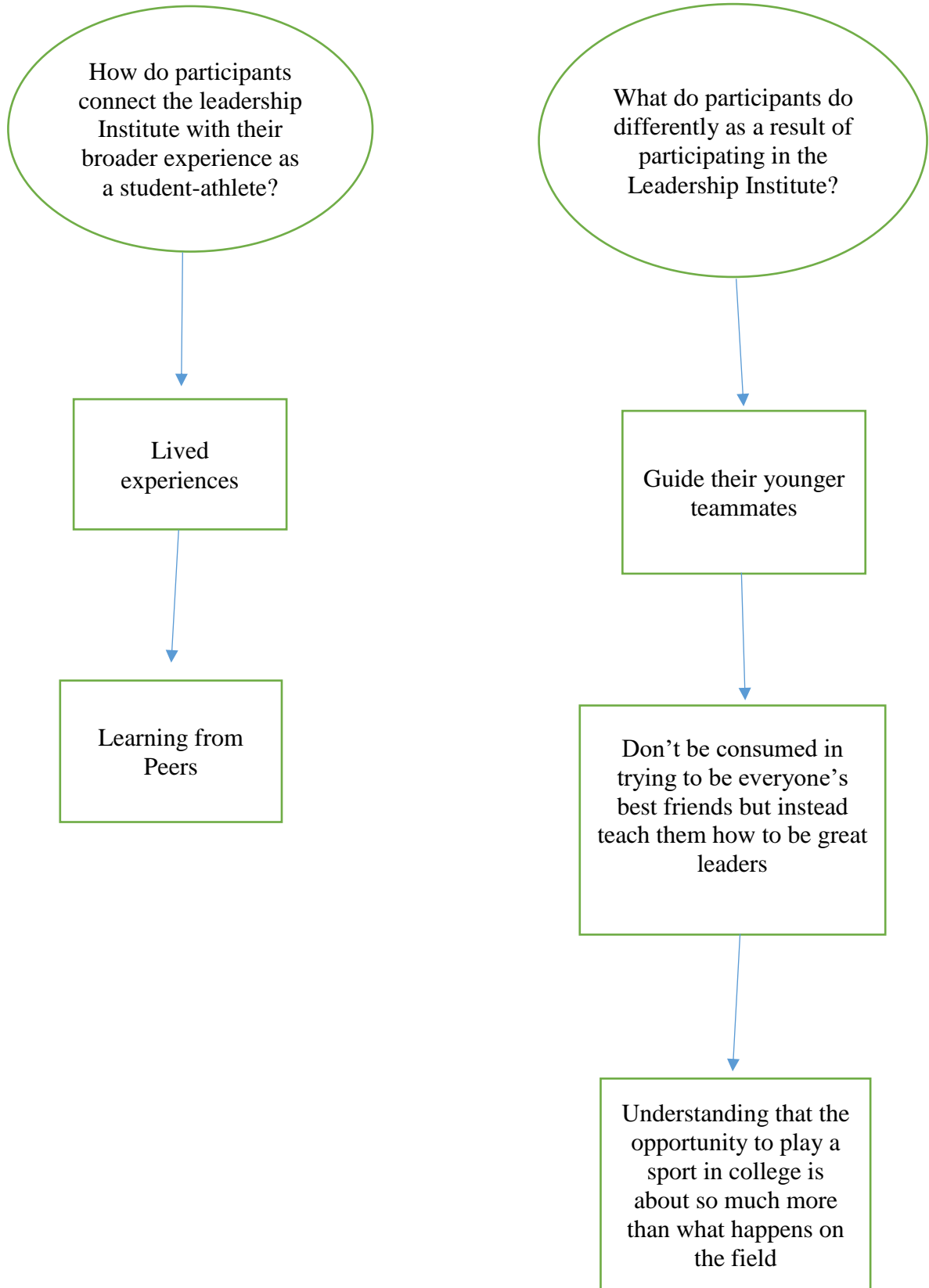
This section contains results collected from interviews with 10 Virginia Tech student-athletes in the spring of 2019. In this study, I examined Virginia Tech student athletes using a qualitative case study design. The results from this study are presented in this chapter and are directed at the two research questions:

- “How do participants connect the Leadership Institute with their broader experience as a student-athlete?”
- “What do participants do differently as a result of participating in the Leadership Institute?”

### **Themes**

Each research question yielded associated themes (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Overview of Results Organized by Research Question.**



## **Lived Experiences**

The first theme conveys the importance of lived experiences. For example, one participant shared:

“I think having that scheduled meeting time, you may not actively think about being a leader but when you go there once a month it refocuses and re-centers, you, and you can think about, what am I doing on my team to be a better leader.” (SA1)

Another explained:

“I think one thing that has really helped me is going to the Leadership Culture events. I started going to them my sophomore year, and they have become more frequent too, which has been helpful, because I think the most important way to learn leadership is to hear it from people who actually put it into practice in everyday life.” (SA2)

Back to the research question about how participants connect the Leadership Institute with their broader experience, an athlete explained:

“The Leadership Institute is a great place to reflect on your personal leadership style, learn from fellow athletes around you, and learn from trained individuals about leadership. I have taken a lot of lessons away from this organization, but one of the most recent and important was about legacy. It helped put into perspective my daily actions and words toward my team and how I need to focus on driving them to use their platform as an athlete to leave a greater legacy. My leadership skills definitely were influenced to be more adaptive and alter my style depending on which teammate I am looking to lead and how they are best influenced.” (SA3)



## **Learning from Peers**

The second theme conveys the importance of learning from peers. For example, one participant shared:

“I think that early on I kind of realized what it takes to be a leader from some of the older guys in the sport of wrestling and a lot of that comes from earning the respect of your teammates, from caring about them, hard work, basically because you want to get better and want the team to get better. That carries a lot of weight on how guys view you as a leader. As I grew up in my work ethic and character, I feel like that helped me grow on the team and push my teammates to be better leaders as well.” (SA2)

Another said:

“My coaches and teammates have impacted me as a leader. No matter what I am doing, they are always there to tell me if I am doing something good or bad. They are always giving me great feedback. It is like a family because they make me want to better myself.” (SA2)

Back to the research question about how participants connect the Leadership Institute with their broader experience, an athlete explained:

“Something I have taken away from one of the Leadership Institute events that will help me with my leadership skills is when we talked about our legacy. It made me realize what is important to me and how I want my impression on people to last. The leadership activities that have impacted me the most are events where I am surrounded by athletes from other sports so I can meet new people and learn from them.” (S-A,4)

## **Guide Younger Teammates**

The third theme highlights that Leadership Institute participants guide their younger teammates. For example, one participant shared:

“I wanted to be a role model for the younger players on my team because, when I was a freshman, I looked up to the older girls who paved the way for me.” (SA5)

Another said:

“One piece of advice that I tell my younger teammates is to embrace the concepts, learn from everyone and anyone whether that be learning what you like to act like as a leader or what not to act like at all.” (SA3)

Back to the research question about what Leadership Institute participants do differently, an athlete explained:

“One thing I learned from the Leadership Institute is how to grow my confidence. As a freshman, I was a leader of a few, really only the people in my class. As I got older and wiser and learned from my experiences, I began to have the confidence to lead my whole team.” (SA4)

## **Teach Others How to be Great Leaders**

The fourth theme highlights that Leadership Institute participants are not consumed in trying to be everyone’s best friends but instead teach them how to be great leaders. For example, one participant shared:

“One thing I learned from the Leadership Institute is to be a leader at all times and more concerned about being a good example as opposed to being liked. It is something especially as a freshman and sophomore that can consume you because you are

constantly trying to gain approval from everyone so they like you. Being liked will come by having high character and being a leader.” (SA6)

Another said:

“One thing that I have noticed is that I am more vocal with my teammates and the friendships I have with people. If I see a teammate doing something that they shouldn’t or that they can get better at I feel comfortable talking with them about it and know that they will not turn their backs and talk negatively about me.” (SA7)

Back to the research question about what Leadership Institute participants do differently, an athlete explained:

“After going to Next Level Leadership retreats, I am now more comfortable approaching my teammates and having a hard conversation with them. This is a topic that I struggled with before we talked about it during our Next Level Leadership retreat.” (SA8)

### **More Than What Happens on the Field**

The fifth theme highlights that Leadership Institute participants are understanding that the opportunity to play a sport in college is about so much more than what happens on the field. For example, one participant shared:

“You develop into an entirely new person just through interacting and engaging with your teammates and the athletic department.” (SA9)

Another said:

“Embrace the leadership role from the beginning and learn as you go. Try to make an impact from the start and don’t hold back simply because you’re considered young.” (SA2)

Back to the research question about what Leadership Institute participants do differently, an athlete explained:

“After attending Leadership Institute events I am able to speak in front of my team and coaches confidently. I finally feel comfortable going into talk with the nutritionist, sports psychologist, trainer about any issues I had. I am a quiet person who sometimes shy’s away from speaking out in front of others.” (SA10)

Some of the phrases in the interviews described a sense of leadership, belonging, and maturity in the student athletes. These qualities relate to the development in leadership that the student athletes and their coaches are noticing in all aspect of their experiences such as the weight room, training room, nutrition, etc. The student athletes noticed an increase in confidence after participating in the Leadership Institute. One example of this is when one participant said:

“I noticed my leadership increase through my years as a student and so did my confidence. As a freshman, I was a leader to only people in my class, but as I got older and wiser and learned from my experiences, I began to have the confidence to lead my whole team.” (SA1)

### **Kirkpatrick-Level Evaluation**

The four stages of the Kirkpatrick model are: reaction, learning, behavior, and results (Kirkpatrick & Kirkpatrick, 2010). Three out of the four levels were used in this research study. The first level is the reaction level which is when participants find the training useful, engaging, and relevant. An example of this level taking place is when a participant said:

“I really liked how we did the enneagram activity during Next Level leadership; it really helped me learn from my peers in understanding each other’s types. I think that is a great activity that my team can do to get to know each other on a more personal level.” (SA7)

The next level is the learning level. This is when participants obtain the intended knowledge, skills, confidence, and commitment based on their participation in the training. One example of the learning level is when a student athlete stated:

“One major point that I learned is that there are so many different types of leaders. I think so often people think about the person who is the loudest and willing to gather a bunch of people and take charge. I have always seen myself as a leader but not in the sense of being loud but in the sense of leading by example. I learned that I do not have to be the loudest of the best to gather a group, but I can be a leader just by my work ethic on and off the field. That is a major point I learned in leadership culture that I will share with my future teammates.” (SA4)

The third level is the behavior level. This is the degree to which participants apply what they have learned to their practical work. An example of this is when a participant explained:

“I have been told multiple times by my coaches, trainers, and nutritionist that they have noticed me stepping up as a leader. I do think everything I have learned on a day-to-day basis has made an impact on me. I noticed that they have been giving me these compliments ever since I have started going to Leadership Institute events.” (SA8)

Considering Kirkpatrick level four, results, that level impact takes more time to develop. The hope is the student athletes will eventually offer reflections similar to alumnus Jordan Fish, who said: “The leadership development program had a huge impact on my career” (Virginia Tech Athletics, 2018).

### **Recommendations**

Anyone performing a research study similar to this one should add a more diverse population of participants. This will aid in more accurate data across the athletic department. The

downside to this is that not all sports teams participate in each event so increasing participation will help. Further research studies are going to be able to learn from this one and have a guide as to how they will perform their study. This initial study of the Leadership Institute has been a way to strengthen and advance the skills of student athletes in the Virginia Tech athletic department.

Secondly, Virginia Tech Athletics should conduct follow-up focus groups after each Leadership Institute event in order to obtain feedback. As opposed to doing an interview, there are some survey tools that can be used to evaluate the student athletes and streamline insight into feedback for the institute. A focus group is also a great way to provide group feedback by getting at least one student athlete from each sports team in a room together and ask them questions to see the different answers that they may provide. This is a way that student athletes can learn from one another and get to know how each other's team dynamics are.

After the interview process, many participants had several takeaways and things they would do differently if they could start college all over in the Leadership Institute. Many said they would have been more proactive building relationships with people they want to lead. In addition, they wanted to have more conversations with people about their failures and successes to learn from their mistakes or things that worked for them. The biggest takeaway from the interviews was talking to people in order to learn from them. A lot of people are going through the same issues your team is going through, so if you take the opportunity to talk with them you may be able to use their experiences to help you. Lastly, is to try and make an impact from the start and don't hold back simply because you are considered young.

By sharing this information with the Leadership Institute, it is hoped that the administrators can take this information and better their institute in a way that the student athletes can benefit both on and off the field with their leadership skills. Interviews should be a

yearly task for the Leadership Institute because so much more information is shared in an interview where they have time to expand upon experiences. By sending out a survey at the end of the year, many student athletes are busy and either do not have time to fill it out or will not take their time and be sincere with it.

### **Conclusion**

In examining the results of the Leadership Institute interviews, key elements of the program were identified that should be used when creating a program similar to this one. The interview experience was new to me to be on the side of interviewing student athletes and not actually being the one interviewed. Social Learning Theory was a vulnerable framework for analyzing the data, because it helped uncover key themes associated with peer-to-peer learning among the student athletes. The variety of information produced by these interviewers' shows how important the method of interviewing is. When working with young adults, they were very confident in their speaking and tend to get side tracked when they think of more experiences they have had. Although an interview eliminates interaction with the other participants, it is still a great way to get information relayed from the participant to the interviewer. One theme that each participant came to realize while being a student athlete is that playing a sport in college is so much more than what happens on the field; but it is the relationships and knowledge that is created off the field. Those long-term results take time to develop, and Kirkpatrick-type evaluations need to take that time in to account.

Being a part of the different leadership opportunities at Virginia Tech are what has made the biggest impact on these student athletes and what has shaped them into the leaders they are both on and off the field. The Leadership Institute is a great place to reflect in your personal leadership style, learn from fellow athletes around you, and learn from trained individuals about

leadership. In addition, the support that the leadership Institute gives student athletes is what fires them up and makes them want to become better leaders because there are so many individuals who are trying to help them become strong individuals who can lead a team. By Virginia Tech giving the student athletes the opportunity to be a part of these programs they have all seen growth throughout their entire experiences including in the weight room, training room, strength and conditioning, and nutrition.



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## Appendix A

### Email Script for Recruitment

Hi [FirstName],

My name is Mary Claire Byrne and I am a graduate student at Virginia Tech.

I am currently working towards the completion of my degree by conducting research on student athlete leadership. Part of my research includes interviewing student athletes who have participated in the Leadership Institute events to gather information in order to better the program.

Would you be willing to participate in this interview? The interview will take approximately 30 minutes to complete, and I will be writing some notes and recording your responses using an audio recorder. All answers will be kept confidential. You will not be identified by name or sport.

Participation in the interview is completely voluntary. You will not receive compensation for participation.

Please respond to me via email ([marycb7@vt.edu](mailto:marycb7@vt.edu)) to confirm your interest to participate and for further information about this project.

Thank you,  
Mary Claire Byrne (Women's Lacrosse)

## Appendix B

### RESEARCH SUBJECT CONSENT FORM

**Title:** Leadership in Student-Athletes  
**Protocol No.:** 19-068  
**Sponsor:** Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University  
**Investigator:** Eric Kaufman  
175 West Campus Dr  
Blacksburg VA 24061

**Co-Investigator:** Mary Claire Byrne  
209 S Knollwood dr  
Blacksburg, VA 24060

**Daytime Phone Number:** 703-434-2077  
**24-hour Phone Number:** 703-434-2077

#### Purpose of the Research Project

The purpose of this study is to secure valid evidence of the impact of Leadership Institute on participants. I will interview about 10 student athletes who have participated in any of the events from the Leadership Institute. I will ask open-ended questions that allow participants to share their insights and experience with the Leadership Institute. I will report useful information and data back to the Virginia Tech student athletic leadership committee so they can improve the events to benefit student athletes' overall experience.

## **RESEARCH CONSENT SUMMARY**

You are being asked for your consent to take part in a research study. This document provides a concise summary of this research. It describes the key information that we believe most people need to decide whether to take part in this research. Later sections of this document will provide all relevant details.

### **What should I know about this research?**

- Someone will explain this research to you.
- Taking part in this research is voluntary. Whether you take part is up to you.
- If you don't take part, it won't be held against you.
- You can take part now and later drop out, and it won't be held against you
- If you don't understand, ask questions.
- Ask all the questions you want before you decide.

### **How long will I be in this research?**

We expect that your taking part in this research will last 30 Minutes.

### **Why is this research being done?**

The purpose of this research is to identify if the Leadership Institute is helping the student athletes gain knowledge to lead themselves and their team in their overall experience at Virginia Tech.

### **What happens to me if I agree to take part in this research?**

If you decide to take part in this research study, the general procedures include signing this consent form and participating in a 30-minute one-on-one interview with the facilitator. The interview will be audio recorded for transcription, allowing the recording to be deleted the day after the interview.

### **Could being in this research hurt me?**

The most important risks or discomforts that you may expect from taking part in this research include being recorded in the interviews so the facilitator can transcribe the interview afterwards.

### **Will being in this research benefit me?**

The most important benefits that you may expect from taking part in this research include using participant's statements to better the student athlete leadership institute in the future.

### **What other choices do I have besides taking part in this research?**

Instead of being in this research, your choices may include: continuing to partake in the Leadership Institute events in order to better your knowledge of leadership and developing yourself as a person.

**What else should I know about this research?**

Other information that may be important for you to consider so you can decide whether to take part in this research is that your answers are confidential. The audio recording from the interview will be kept confidential and erased once the transcription of the interview is complete, and no personally identifying information will be included in the transcript. All data will be kept in password-protected files that are only accessible by the research team.

**Statement of Consent:**

Your signature documents your permission for you or the individual named below to take part in this research.

_____	_____
Signature of person obtaining consent	Date
_____	_____
Printed name of subject (not required if subject personally provided consent)	Date

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol

Before conducting the interview, confirm the participant has received an informed consent form and invite the opportunity for questions about the study. Before proceeding with the following prompts, request the interviewee sign and return the consent form.

- Tell me about your experience in developing as a student athlete
  - How have you noticed your leadership increase through your years as a student athlete at Virginia Tech?
- Who are some individuals in the athletic department that have impacted you as a leader?
  - How have they made you want to be a better teammate or leader?
- I know that you have been a part of the Leadership Institute and have participated in a few events, how does the Leadership Institute compliment your student athlete experience?
  - Can you explain something you've taken away from one of the events that will help you with your leadership skills either on or off the field?
  - What leadership activities have impacted you the most?
- What other aspects of your student athlete experience have impacted you the most?
  - Have you been told by your nutritionist, strength coach, trainer, etc, that they have noticed you stepping up and being a leader?
  - If so, did you take a moment to think about how everything you have learned is making an impact on a day to day basis?
- What are some takeaways or “ah ha” moments that you have learned from any of the events within the leadership Institute?
  - What is something you would do differently if you could start college over that could benefit you to being a better leader?
- Is there anything else you would like to share about the leadership Institute?



# Appendix D

## Leadership Institute Brochure

### LEADERSHIP STAFF



Danny White serves as the senior associate athletics director of student-athlete services and university affairs and has been involved in leadership development at Virginia Tech since 2007. He was a member of the swim team at the University of South Carolina where he graduated with a degree in finance, and received his master of education from Virginia Tech. He currently is pursuing a Ph.D., at Virginia Tech in planning, governance and globalization.



Clinical and Sport Psychologist, Dr. Gary Bennett, works with teams and with individual student-athletes on issues affecting their lives inside and outside of their sport. Bennett graduated from Centre College (Ky.) in 1981, where he played baseball, and holds a master's in rehabilitation counseling and a doctorate in counseling psychology from the University of Kentucky. Bennett is a licensed clinical psychologist and is certified as a sport psychology consultant.



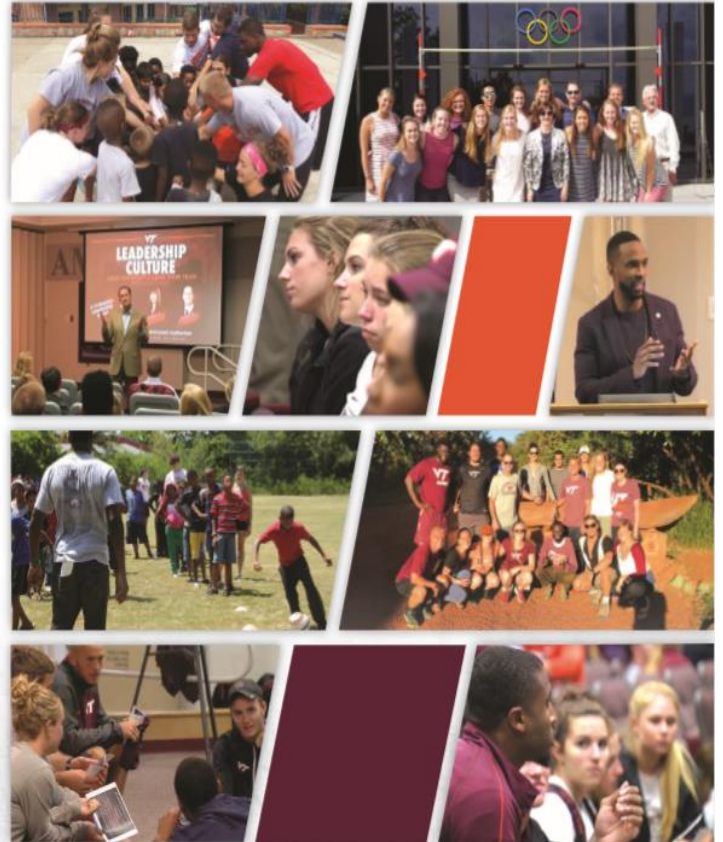
Shelby Miller serves as the director of student-athlete development. She is responsible for assisting with leadership development programming, including the study abroad course for student-athletes and co-advising the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee. Miller graduated from Northern Illinois University with a degree in corporate/organization communication, and was a three-year starter on the Huskies softball team. She also received a master's in sport management from NIU.



*Gifts to the Leadership Institute go directly to helping create a culture of service and to providing the foundational support for the development of leadership skills of Hokie student-athletes.*

*Support for this project is sincerely appreciated by Virginia Tech coaches and student-athletes! Gifts to this program are above and beyond gifts to the Hokie Scholarship Fund and add to a donor's cumulative priority point total. However, they do not count as a scholarship fund donation and do not offer annual benefits.*

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON GIVING TO THE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE, PLEASE CONTACT  
CARLY NORTUP IN THE HOKIE CLUB  
AT 540.231.6618 OR [carlyn@vt.edu](mailto:carlyn@vt.edu)



# VT LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE

VIRGINIA TECH DEPARTMENT OF ATHLETICS