



Model United Nations and Model African Union at an HBCU: Experiential Learning Tools for Increasing Student Success

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Abstract

This article analyzes the results of a survey sent to former and current Savannah State University (SSU) students who participated in local, regional, national, and international Model African Union and Model United Nations conferences from fall 2004 – spring 2021. The two-part survey utilized quantitative and qualitative methodological techniques of Likert scale questions, 15 in total, and open-ended questions, seven in total, for the purpose of understanding topics in students' experiential learning experiences that positively impacted them and their careers. Additionally, open-ended responses were used to justify answers in Likert scale questions. The findings indicate that the Model AU/UN experiential experiences positively shaped students, particularly in areas such as coalition building skills and skills needed to build relationships with other individuals. Findings in this paper can serve as an example to other Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) that wish to substantiate their need to create or expand Model AU/UN experiential learning opportunities

Keywords: Experiential learning, Savannah State University, HBCUs, Model African Union, Model United Nations

INTRODUCTION

Model United Nations (MUN) and Model African Union (MAU) fit in the category of co-curricular activities designed to enhance students' learning and skills through practical experiences. Major institutions of higher learning, mostly predominantly white colleges and universities, have recognized the positive impact of these programs to the point that they continue to intensify efforts through attractive incentives to get their students involved in these role-playing educational activities. The increasing number of Model United Nations/African Union (Model UN/AU) students who represent predominantly white institutions is the outcome of the extensive resources provided by the administrations of these institutions. These resources cover students' travel expenses, accommodation costs, registration fees and some meals in order to allow students to participate effectively in the various Model United Nations/African Union conferences in the USA and overseas. The availability of financial resources coupled with the possibility of earning academic credits gives an advantage to students enrolled in well-endowed colleges and universities in terms of performance in these role-paying educational activities. This justifies the outstanding performance of students who represent institutions that provide extensive support to Model UN/AU programs.

Literature Review

Educating students in this 21st century requires various approaches and strategies that facilitate and stimulate learning. As international events affect domestic conditions and job markets extend beyond national borders, the world is becoming more and more interdependent. Issues affecting the world have no boundaries and their solutions require a global approach. Solving world problems requires a global approach through cooperation and negotiations involving decision-makers from different cultural and geographic backgrounds. College students must be cognizant of the fact that global cooperation can promote peace and prosperity around the world. Unfortunately, students across the United States display significant deficiency in world geography and global affairs. It has become evident

that there is an urgent need for students, who are tomorrow's decision-makers, to understand and address global issues in the most effective way. This urgency is compounded by the desire of employers, including the federal government, to recruit well-informed graduates who can articulate positions on these critical issues in a concise and analytical manner.

In response to the need to train and prepare students to face the global challenges of the 21st century, most universities are developing their curricula to facilitate and promote the global competence of their students. Many other academic institutions are funding co-curricular activities designed to reinforce and enrich the global competence obtained in the classroom. One of these co-curricular activities is the Model UN/AU that gives students the ability to carry out the work of ambassadors at the United Nations and African Union. This role-playing approach has been so effective that more and more academic institutions are using it to train and prepare their students for a leadership role in the global community.

The role-playing approach has been considered as an effective instrument of active learning for several decades. Many experts in education have stressed the importance of using strategies designed to make students active learners. Mark Chesler and Robert Fox (1966) stress the impact of making students active learners by playing the role of other persons. They argue that " basically, role playing calls for a student's stepping outside the accustomed role that he plays in life, relinquishing his usual patterns of behavior in exchange for the role and patterns of another person. This other role may be that of a real person or may be entirely fictitious" (p. 3). It is worth noting that the role playing approach gets students out of their comfort zone and makes them playsomebody's else role. This makes students conduct research to understand the issue, the position of the person he/she is role-playing and the rationale of the position as he/she is expected to defend the position. Sherrie Nist-Olejnik and Jodie Holschuh (2000) have also stressed the impact of active learning on students' academic success. They advise students to be active learners in college by using the tools to handle the studying and learning demands placed on them and the desire and motivation to follow through (p. 32). In the case of the Model UN/AU, students must have the motivation and willingness to carry out the rigorous tasks assigned to them in order to get the full benefit of this educational tool. Most students involved in the Model UN/AU have expressed nothing but praises and positive comments about their experiences and most of them have been successful in their academic endeavors. Emeline Suteau (2013), education program coordinator of the United Nations Association of Australia, provides the following statements expressed by students about their experiences of the Model United Nations Conference program run by the United Nations Association of Australia: " Eye opening"... " A fantastic yet challenging experience"... " A great way to learn about the world and rising issues we are facing and will face in the future"... " A deeply enlightening experience that expanded my knowledge of the world greatly"... "Enables you to learn about global citizenship and how the world is much more than Facebook, hair extensions and cute boys"... Clearly, students enjoy the program and become predisposed to learn while having fun at the same time. Needless to argue that having fun at the Model UN/AU does not emasculate the rigor of research and the requirement to defend orally one's position in a public forum. At the conclusion of the conference, outstanding students and delegations are recognized with diplomacy awards. Therefore, students participating in these programs do not lose sight of the fact that winning awards to project a positive image of their academic institutions is one of their major goals. Overall, the simulation of the proceedings of the United Nations and African Union has been recognized as a major educational tool that transforms students in a very positive way. In their survey of Model UN students, Susan Engel, Josh Pallas, and Sarah Lambert (2017) make the following statement: "...All students indicated a range of areas where they had learned useful skills. The specific skills identified by multiple students were: communication and public speaking, formal meeting procedures, negotiation, diplomacy, problem solving, research, writing professionally, teamwork and engagement in the digital sphere..." (p. 179).

Some of the most popular Model UN conferences in the USA include the Harvard World Model United Nations, the American Model United Nations and the Southern Regional Model United Nations. For the Model African Union, the only two popular Models in the USA are the International Model African Union and the Southeast Model African Union. The Harvard World Model United Nations meets annually in different countries but only two HBCUs, namely Savannah State University and Spelman College, regularly attend these conferences. A discussion of the impact of the Model UN on Savannah State University students is in order.

BACKGROUND

Savannah State University is one of the two HBCUs that have regularly participated in the prestigious Harvard World Model United Nations (WORLDMUN), which is the only international Model United Nations that brings close to 2,000 students from all continents every year. WORLDMUN is held every year in different countries and attracts talented students from various prestigious academic institutions in the world. Unfortunately, Savannah State University and Spelman College are the only two HBCUs that participate every year in this conference. In addition to the Harvard World Model UN, Savannah State University has been the only HBCU that regularly participates in the Southern Regional Model United Nations, which meets annually in Atlanta. Furthermore, Savannah State University participates every year in the International Model African Union, which

meets annually in Washington, DC and the Southeast Model African Union, which meets in different cities in the State of Georgia.

For over 16 years in a row, Savannah State University has used the Model UN/AU as a role-playing approach to train, educate, and transform students. This approach seems to be effective in providing students with outstanding skills that may not be acquired in the classroom. Over all these years of participation in the Model UN/AU conferences, no study has ever been conducted to assess unequivocally the impact of these programs on the academic performance of Savannah State University's students and their professional careers. Hence, this article intends to address the following questions: How has the Model UN/AU been effective in the education of students at Savannah State University? Based on the experience of Savannah State University, why and how should other HBCUs become involved in the Harvard World Model United Nations and the international Model AU?

This article examines the extent to which the Model United Nations and the Model African Union, as experiential learning tools, have transformed Savannah State University students and the benefit for other HBCUs to emulate the example of Savannah State University in order to level the playing field as all academic institutions educate and train students to be competitive in the job market.

METHODS

Given the number of options in terms of student organizations at SSU, the authors expected that an interest in careers in international affairs, diplomacy, and foreign service was of importance to students participating in the Model UN/AU student organizations. As such, the U.S. Department of State's "Which Career Track is Right for You?" questionnaire guided the development of our survey questions (U.S. State Department, undated). See <https://careers.state.gov/work/foreign-service/officer/career-track-quiz/#>). The Likert scale questions were adapted from the U.S. State Department's questionnaire and examine the level of agreement that respondents have on a five-point scale of: Strongly disagree; Disagree; Undecided; Agree; or, Strongly agree.

Based on Certificates of Participation in Southeast Regional Model African Union (SEMAU), Southern Regional Model United Nations (SRMUN), International Model African Union (IMAU), and/or Harvard Model United Nations (HMUN), a total of 55 Savannah State University (SSU) participants from the inauguration of the Model African Union (AU) and Model United Nations (UN) student programs in 2004 through the end of spring 2021 were identified. In total, contact information was found for 46 students/former students and surveys were sent to them beginning on April 3, 2021 and requesting responses by April 30, 2021. CampusLabs platform was employed to send the survey, create a link for respondents to use, assure that respondents' answers were anonymous, and analyze the data collected. The two-part survey utilized quantitative and qualitative methodological techniques of Likert scale questions and open-ended questions.

Nonrespondents were sent reminders for each of the three full weeks the survey was open. In sum, 33 surveys were submitted/returned to researchers. However, one response was deleted due to a straightlining situation in which a respondent chose one answer- "Strongly Disagree" -throughout the Likert scale section (Gitlin, undated; Mahmutovic, 2021). Overall, a total of 32 responses were analyzed for open-ended questions indicating a response rate of 69.76%; and, 31 responses were analyzed for Likert scale questions indicating a response rate of 67.4%.

FINDINGS

For the purpose of this paper, survey responses meeting a 90% threshold for "Strongly Agree" will be examined. The survey results indicate that responses to four Likert scale questions meet or exceed 90% for "Strongly Agree." The four questions are:

Q18. Please indicate your level of agreement with the below statements: Participation in Model AU/Un conferences positively impacted my...-Ability to build relationships with other individuals (e.g., students from other universities, faculty advisors, and people from other countries): 96.77% "Strongly agree"

Q21. Please indicate your level of agreement with the below statements: Participation in Model AU/UN conferences positively impacted my...-Ability to interact with people across cultures: 96.77% "Strongly agree"

Q9. Please indicate your level of agreement with the below statements: Participation in Model AU/UN conferences positively impacted my...-Public speaking skills: 93.55% "Strongly agree"

Q10. Please indicate your level of agreement with the below statements: Participation in Model AU/UN conferences positively impacted my...-Coalition building skills: 90.32% "Strongly agree"

Q18 and Q21 are somewhat related in that building relationships with individuals and positively interacting with people across cultures are closely associated. It came as no surprise that the two questions had the same result of 96.77 percent. As such, the two questions are explored together when considering statements from the open-ended section of the survey. When asked “What impact has Model AU/UN had on your professional growth,” some respondents in the open-ended questions section of the survey replied: “collaborating with others,” “it assisted me with collaborating with others to accomplish one goal,” “Model AU helped me step out of my comfort zone by forcing me to interact with unfamiliar people,” “Model AU taught me...how to engage with people from different backgrounds,” “Model AU/UN has definitely...helped me become better at networking,” “Through these Model AU/UN platforms, I was able to build lasting relationships with people from other places through meetings in conferences,” and “The experience of meeting new national and international students and the ability to work cooperatively with them is applicable to all jobs.”

The percentage of “Strongly agree” for positive impact on Q9, public speaking skills, was 93.55 percent. Throughout the responses to open-ended questions were comments about the positive impact Model AU/UN had on public speaking skills. For example, “Model UN has increased my leadership, negotiation, public speaking, research, logistical, and problem solving skills.” “Model AU/UN has definitely helped me polish my public speaking skills,” “I am a good public speaker today, thanks to this great opportunity,” and, “The Model United Nations simulations and conferences enabled me to address any audience without reservation of being unprepared.” For Q10, inquiring about the positive impact Model AU/UN had on coalition building skills, 90.32 percent of respondents indicated “Strongly agree.” Written comments by former and current SSU Model AU/UN participants indicates the importance that coalition building had on the students. Some of their comments include, “The commonality that markedly supports the foundation of all my endeavors and professional activities has been perfecting the art of keeping the lines of communication open until a resolution with a favorable outcome is achieved.” A corporate Compliance Specialist noted, “MUN also taught me how to rally support for my projects, collaborating with others, and the importance of diplomatic relations.” Lastly, one respondent stated, “It [Model AU/UN] assisted me with learning how to conduct myself in meetings as well as collaborate with others to accomplish one common goal.”

Figure 1

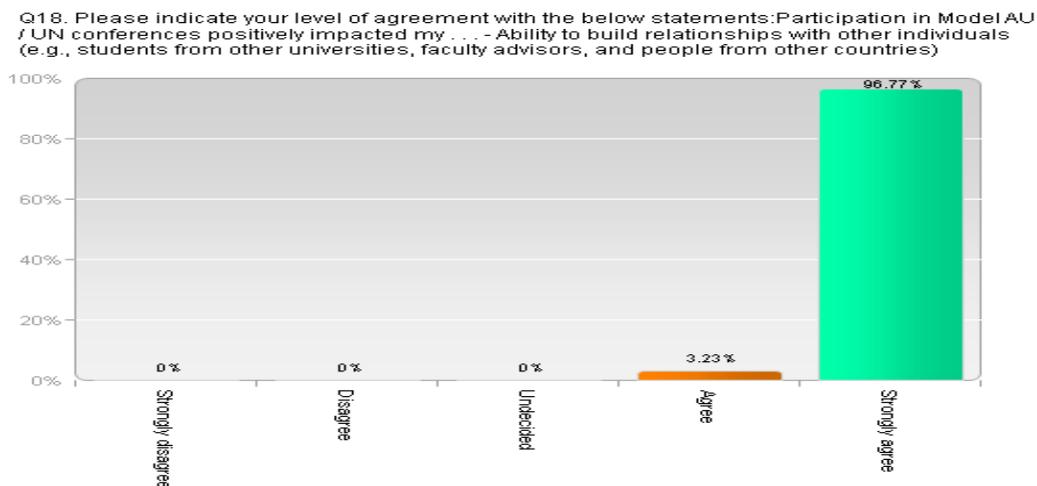
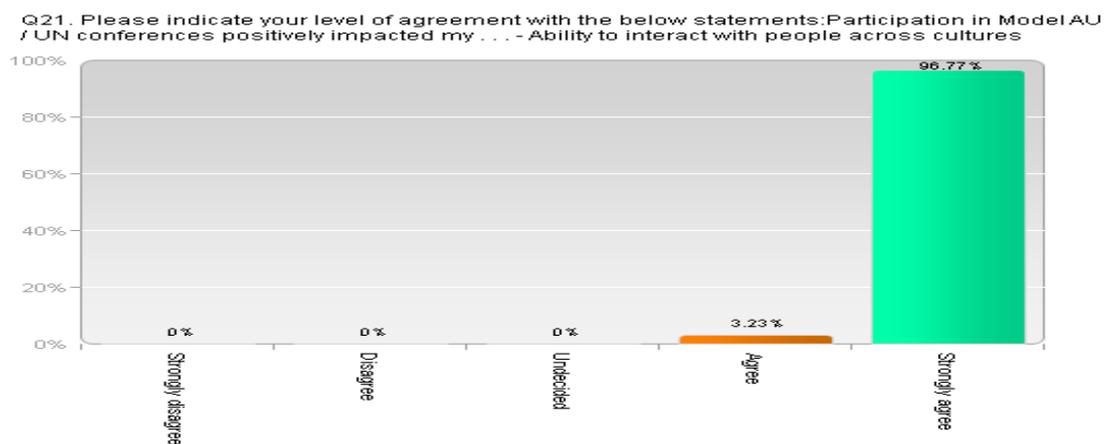
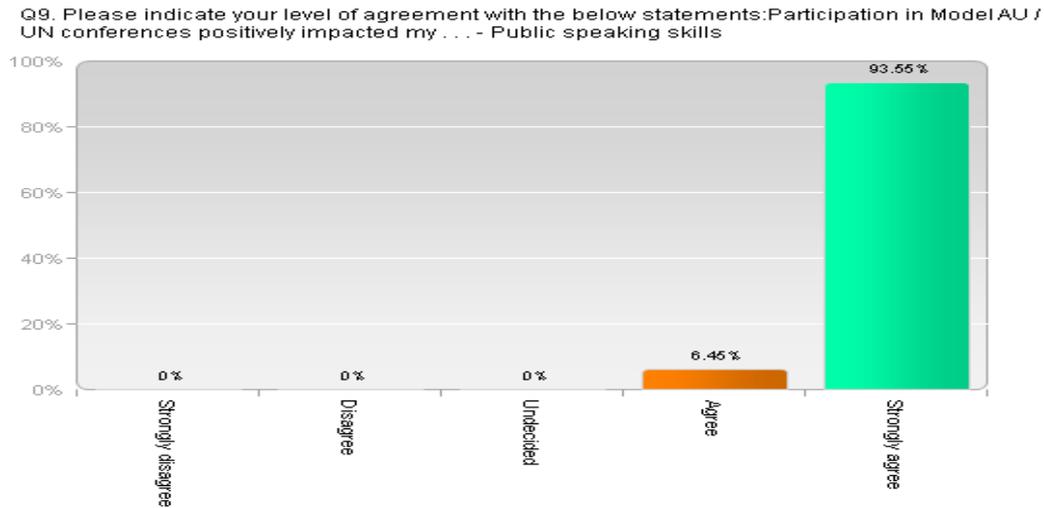


Figure 2



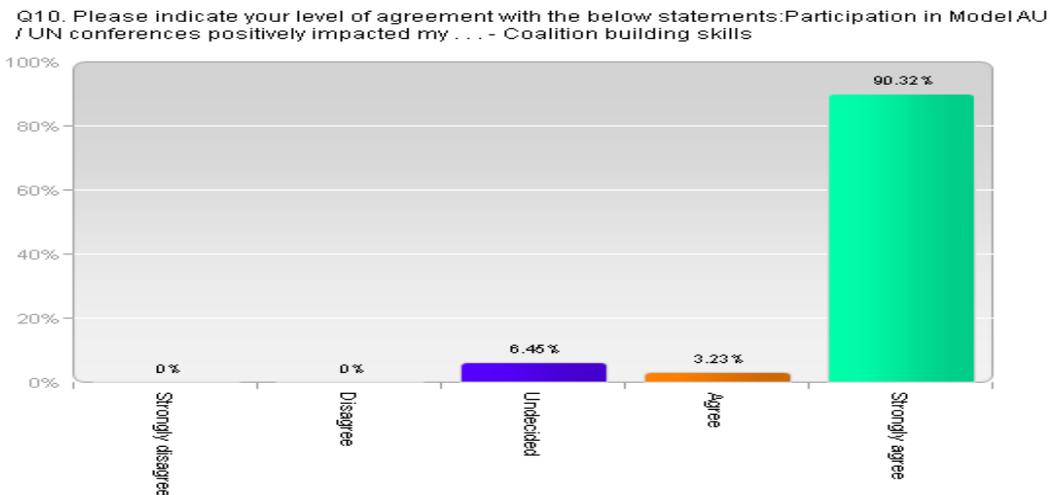
As noted earlier, Q18 and Q21 are somewhat related in that building relationships with individuals and positively interacting with people across cultures are closely associated. It came as no surprise, then, that the two questions had the same “Strongly agree” result of 96.77 percent. As such, the two questions are explored together when considering statements from the open-ended section of the survey. Examples of responses in open-ended survey include, “it assisted me with...collabora[ting] with others to accomplish one goal,” “Model AU helped me step out of my comfort zone by forcing me to interact with unfamiliar people,” “Model AU taught me...how to engage with people from different backgrounds,” “Model AU/UN has definitely...helped me become better at networking,” “Through these [Model AU/UN] platforms, I was able to build lasting relationships with people from other places through meetings in conferences,” and “The experience of meeting new national and international students and the ability to work cooperatively with them is applicable to all jobs.”

Figure 3



Public speaking is at the core of the Model UN/AU experience. These programs are not designed for shy individuals because they require active engagement in debates. Any person exposed to Model UN/AU experience develops a significant interest in public speaking. The percentage of “Strongly agree” for positive impact on Q9, public speaking skills, was 93.55 percent. Throughout the responses to open-ended questions were comments about the positive impact Model AU/UN had on public speaking skills. For example, “Model UN has increased my leadership, negotiation, public speaking, research, logistical, and problem solving skills.” “Model AU/UN has definitely helped me polish my public speaking skills,” “I am a good public speaker today, thanks to this great opportunity,” and, “The Model United Nations simulations and conferences enabled me to address any audience without reservation of being unprepared.”

Figure 4



For Q10, inquiring about the positive impact Model AU/UN had on coalition building skills, 90.32 percent of respondents indicated “Strongly agree.” Written comments by former SSU Model AU/UN participants indicate the importance that coalition building had on the students. Some of their comments include the following. “The commonality that markedly supports the foundation of all my endeavors and professional activities has been perfecting the art of keeping the lines of communication open until a resolution with a favorable outcome is achieved.” A corporate Compliance Specialist noted, “MUN also taught me how to rally support for my projects, collaborating with others, and the importance of diplomatic relations.” Lastly, one respondent stated, “It [Model AU/UN] assisted me with learning how to conduct myself in meetings as well as collaborate with others to accomplish one common goal.”

Discussion and Conclusions/Implications

Building relationships with individuals, positively interacting with people across cultures, and coalition building are considered people skills that our students felt were positively impacted by participation in Model AU/UN conferences. We are pleased with those top, positive findings and note how they are in concert with Model AU/UN objectives. For example, among the actions that the International Model African Union is designed to accomplish is “To demonstrate the patterns of cooperation and conflict that characterize intra-African diplomacy in the search for solutions to continental problems”; moreover, the Harvard National Model United Nations states that “Participants at our conference form lasting friendships and connections that transcend boundaries, cross cultures, and extend far beyond the four days we spend together at conference.” These experiential learning opportunities provide long-lasting skills for participants.

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