Leadership Development as a Systematic and Multidisciplinary Enterprise

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ABSTRACT. Leadership development is a fundamental responsibility of colleges and universities. In this article, the authors present the theoretical foundation of an innovative initiative, as well as criteria for assessing leadership development programs in higher education. They use the Student Leadership Development Institute at Rutgers University as a case study for demonstrating that leadership development initiatives should be systematic, multidisciplinary, and research oriented and have several experiential components.

Most men and women go through their lives using no more than a fraction—usually a rather small fraction—of the potentialities within them. The reservoir of unused human talent and energy is vast, and learning to tap that reservoir more effectively is one of the exciting tasks ahead for humankind.


Efforts to develop the human potential for leadership have become an increasingly popular theme within recent years. Although this goal is a noble one, those dedicated to this purpose, in higher education and other organizational settings, have come to recognize the considerable challenges in providing educational experiences that help learners effectively translate visions and concepts of leadership into practice. Indeed, after conducting an extensive review of corporate training and development programs that focus on communication abilities, interpersonal skills, and leadership competencies, the Consortium for Research on Emotional Intelligence in Organizations concluded that corporations waste between $5.6 and $16.8 billion each year on ineffective leadership training programs (2002).

One of the fundamental reasons for these programs' inadequacies is their short-term, isolated approach to developing leaders. Simply put, it is unrealistic to expect that enhanced leadership capabilities can be developed in a 2-hour or even a week-long leadership workshop. Rather, leadership competencies are best developed over time through a program that fosters personalized integration of theory and practice and that conceives of leadership development as a recursive and reflective process. Therefore, in this article we argue that colleges and universities have a fundamental responsibility to guide the development of the next generation of capable and ethical leaders and that these institutions must do so through a highly focused, multidisciplinary approach.

Leadership Education: A Necessity

The influence of market economies, the proliferation of technology, and the emergence of new democracies characterize the global arena at the dawn of the 21st century. It is impossible to determine precisely what knowledge and competencies will be required to address the opportunities and challenges of our rapidly changing international environment. It is certain, however, that leadership competencies will be increasingly essential in the United States and around the world.

Yet disaffection and cynicism about leaders and leadership are apparent in many spheres: business, politics, the nonprofit arena, even the formerly sacrosanct religious institutions. Some of the most admired organizations in our society have been tarnished by leadership problems; some were badly mismanaged by individuals incapable of dealing with changing external circumstances, and others were sufficed terribly by those who betrayed the public's trust after abusing the responsibilities of their posts.

Given this climate, leadership education is a necessity. An educated citizenry is the most coveted, vigorously cultivated, and dependable national resource, and higher education rapidly is becoming a requirement for full participation in societies today. In the United States, 63% of high school graduates now go to college, and exponential growth is also occurring abroad. In the United Kingdom, just between 1989 and 1995, the number of full-time students increased by almost 70% (Scott, 2001). Australia
saw an increase of 30% in the number of students participating in higher education over the decade of the 1990s (Commonwealth of Australia Department of Education, Science, and Training, 2002). And China reports that from 1979 through 1997, more than two and a half times more students than in the previous 30 years completed junior college and bachelor’s programs (China Education and Research Network, 2003). To navigate the world’s ever-changing economic, technological, social, and political dynamics, and to overcome the cynicism frequently associated with private- and public-sector leadership, citizens must become better educated to fulfill leadership challenges responsibly, effectively, and ethically.

Although our institutions of higher education have produced many articulate, principled, and effective leaders, it is not difficult to point to graduates of respected institutions who provide spectacular examples of failures in judgment and integrity, and more generally in the execution of their responsibilities as leaders. The unmistakable conclusion is that when it comes to leadership development in higher education, “business as usual” is insufficient. A smattering of classes related to leadership, a commencement address on ethics, a weekend retreat on leadership, or limited involvement in community service can be important components in the leadership development equation, but they are not sufficient in isolation.

To meet the leadership development challenge, colleges and universities must be considerably more proactive and systematic in their leadership education efforts. As a foundation, it is vital to collect and synthesize the various disciplinary perspectives on leadership, identify the competencies necessary to the practice of effective leadership in varying contexts, and determine the appropriate blend of pedagogical methods by which theories and competencies can be taught and learned best.

Theoretical Foundation for Leadership Development Programs

When it comes to reading about leadership, interested parties are not at a loss for material. Indeed, a plethora of academic and popular press literature about leadership exists. Yet selecting and synthesizing appropriate concepts, assumptions, and frameworks offered by various disciplinary perspectives is a difficult and highly subjective undertaking. Seeking to be multidisciplinary in scope, the Student Leadership Development Institute (SLDI) at Rutgers University serves as a case study that draws from concepts and perspectives from the behavioral sciences, ideas from organizational and communication studies, and thoughtful reviews and analyses of professional practice. For our present purposes, we identify nine principles that buttress and give coherence to the SLDI educational initiative:

First, leadership is complex. This is true whether one thinks of leadership in theoretical or pragmatic terms. Contributing to this complexity are the many factors and dimensions associated with a leader, followers, and the situation, as well as the goals, strategies, and culture of the unit (Bennis & Thomas, 2002; Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 1993). The complexities of leadership help explain why there are so many definitions of leadership—a further source of complexity. Some definitions focus on leadership roles or positions, others emphasize leadership outcomes, and still others focus on leadership styles and strategies.

Second, leadership is other-oriented. A common theme in most definitions of leadership is the recognition that leadership is related to others. At various points in time, leadership may involve serving others (Greenleaf, 1977; Spears, 1998), influencing others to achieve a common goal (Bennis, 1997), coordinating and directing others (Fiedler, 1967), understanding and inspiring others (Bass & Avolio, 1994), connecting others (Lawrence & Cermak, 2003; Lipman-Blumen, 2000), and other activities. Common to all definitions is a recognition that leaders work with and through others, an essential component to successful leadership practice.

Third, leadership is interactive and dynamic. Leadership is not characterized by a single or static action, but rather by an ongoing process of interaction between leaders and followers. Burns (1978) noted that these interactions may take two forms. Sometimes leaders and followers interact to exchange valued commodities, either tangible or symbolic (what Burns calls “transactional leadership”). Other times, “leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality. . . . Their purposes. . . . become fused” (Burns’s notion of “transforming leadership,” explained in Burns, 1978, p. 20). During this latter interaction, followers may transform leaders just as much as, if not more than, leaders transform followers. In agreement with Burns, we argue in this article that leader-member relationships are embedded in expectations, values, and systems of power that influence interactions over time.

Fourth, leadership is contextual. Although leadership often is discussed in the abstract, leadership in practice occurs in a specific context. That is, leadership takes place in a particular sector—business, health care, government, or education, for instance. And organizations themselves provide a further contextual framework that is important to leadership. Each organization has a particular mission, a set of aspirations and values, history, rituals, roles, and a unique culture, all of which relate to leadership. Indeed, as Bass noted, “the meaning of leadership may depend on the kind of institution in which it is found” (1995, p. 38). At the very least, leadership practices must be adapted to the context and people that an individual is leading.

Fifth, leadership may be emergent. In many organizations, some leadership roles are structurally defined; individuals who occupy positions carrying the title of CEO, director, or manager are often expected to be leaders. However, leadership opportunities—and often positions—may emerge within organizations. Such is the case with project teams and task forces. In cases in which no formal leader is designated, leadership is wholly emergent (e.g., self-managing teams; see Manz & Sims, 1987). And at times, ordinary
citizens may be prompted to do extraordinary things, emerging as citizen leaders (Cuoto, 1992).

Sixth, leadership is a science and an art. Although leadership is viewed appropriately as an area for social scientific inquiry and theoretical development, the practice of leadership is, to some extent, an art. That is, each leader must learn to apply available theory and research findings in a way that is compatible with his or her own personality, skills, experience, values, capabilities, goals, and contextual assessment. One implication of this way of thinking is that there is no universal leadership approach that should be taught and learned by all (Tichy, 1997), a conclusion that challenges leadership educators. Therefore, leadership development programs must integrate systematically the scientific study of leadership and the applied, subjective, and personalized aspects, through a recursive and reflective learning process that leads to a personalized integration of theory and practice.

Seventh, leadership is enacted through communication. Communication plays a fundamental role in leadership. The behaviors associated with leadership are, in the final analysis, communication behaviors. Leaders not only conceive of a vision, but they must articulate it to others; leaders make decisions, but they must first interact with others to gather needed information and leverage support. Indeed, leadership is displayed and enacted through an individual's verbal, nonverbal, and technologically mediated behaviors (Witherspoon, 1997). This collective set of communication behaviors provides the basis for reputation, credibility, and influence (or lack thereof), all of which are of fundamental interest to leadership study and practice.

Eighth, leadership is increasingly mediated and virtual in nature. There was a time when much of the work of leadership occurred in face-to-face settings. Today, however, leaders in many sectors and organizations interact with colleagues who are separated by time and space (Connaughton & Daly, in press). Communication technology—cell phones, pagers, e-mail, video conferencing, list-erves, chat rooms, intranets—supplement, and sometimes nearly replace, co-located leadership. Given these circumstances, competence in the use of technology for interaction (among other competencies; see Connaughton & Daly, in press) is an important component of leadership expertise.

Ninth, leadership can be learned and taught. One of the most fundamental principles governing leadership education initiatives is that leadership can be learned and taught. Scholars and educators have not always made this argument, however. In some early writings, for instance, leadership was viewed as a static trait (see Stogdill, 1948). Others viewed leadership as linked naturally and necessarily to cognitive ability or general educational accomplishment. We argue, however, that leadership competencies do not develop automatically as a consequence of having particular cognitive capabilities or disciplinary expertise. As with musical, athletic, and other performance competencies, the requisite knowledge and skills for leadership can be taught and learned, and leadership studies is an area of academic inquiry and application in its own right (Connaughton & Quinlan, 2003; Ruben, 2003). In making this point we join other leadership scholars, among them James MacGregor Burns (1978), Daniel Goleman (1997, 1998a, 1998b), Peter Vail (1998), and Howard Prince (2001).

### Benchmarks for Leadership Development Programs in Higher Education

Although we benefit from exemplary models of leadership development in both higher education (e.g., U.S. Military Academy; see McNally, Gerrass, & Bullis, 1996) and in corporate America (e.g., General Electric; see Melum, 2002), we lack a complete theory of how to develop leaders. Until we learn the results of longitudinal studies of leadership development currently under way at Alverno College, Yale University, and the U.S. Military Academy (Horvath, Forsythe, Bullis, Sweeney, Williams, McNally, Wattendorf, & Sternberg, 1999; Mentkowski & Associates, 2000), we must rely on the experiences and reflections of those who have led and been engaged in student leadership development.

Prince (2001) outlined four criteria that a leadership development program must consider. First, the faculty's teaching methods must match the desired outcomes. Our primary goal is to develop leaders, and such a goal necessitates using more than a traditional lecture classroom format. The specifics of such teaching methods are revealed in Prince's other criteria. Second, learning opportunities must be created to allow students to apply and practice their knowledge and to experience the consequences of their actions. Situations must be created that allow students to receive feedback on their leadership processes both inside and outside of the classroom. Third, students must be strongly encouraged to reflect on and discuss their leadership experiences with faculty members and peers. In establishing these criteria, Prince cited Mentkowski and Associates (2000), who reported on early results from a longitudinal leadership development study at Alverno College. They found that reflection is essential for integrating knowledge, experience, and character. And fourth, students must have vicarious learning opportunities. Students learn from more experienced leaders by listening to and interacting with them. As we reveal in the next section, the Rutgers model fits these criteria.

### Preparing the Next Generation of Leaders

Using the Student Leadership Development Institute (SLDI) at Rutgers University as a case study clarifies the process of preparing the next generation of leaders. The SLDI is a dedicated leadership development initiative for undergraduate students. The institute has five objectives: (a) to ground students' comprehension in the academic study of leadership theory; (b) to foster opportunities for students to develop leadership competencies while working on projects of social and civic consequence; (c) to enable students to network with peers, experts, and organizations; (d) to encourage students to reflect on their own
personal leadership philosophy and experience; and (e) to attract national and international leadership experts from academia, politics, government, nonprofit, and for-profit organizations to Rutgers for colloquia and conferences. The initiative aims to enhance significantly the education of the next generation of leaders through a rigorous multidisciplinary program in cooperative, interactive, and ethical leadership. In doing so, SLDI links traditional academic education with experiential and application-oriented instructional methodologies.

There are five components to the institute’s leadership development program (see Figure 1). The first is the Student Leadership Certificate. Designed to begin during a student’s sophomore year, the 15-credit program combines credit-bearing coursework in leadership studies with cocurricular leadership experiences and participation in annual leadership conferences. It enhances students’ leadership competencies and experiences through theoretical and applied course work, internships, and interaction with leaders from business, education, health care, and government and provides a formal leadership certificate upon its completion.

The second component, a Leadership Forum, has two dimensions. The first is a public lecture series in which senior leaders from the public and private sectors share their insights and experiences with students and community members. They discuss topics of importance to contemporary leadership and organizational development, such as knowledge networking, ethics, organizational culture, institutional change, leadership styles, work-life balance, and organizational assessment and change. The second dimension, the Roundtable, consists of smaller luncheon meetings in which invited students and faculty members have the opportunity to continue and deepen their dialogue with the speakers.

The third component, the Student Leadership Conference, is planned and led by certificate students and is open to all students. The conference brings together students, faculty members, staff, and practitioners in a high-profile university event. It has two objectives: (a) to give students opportunities to discuss leadership topics with individuals outside of the classroom and (b) to enable students to put their leadership skills into practice by organizing the conference. The 1-day conference includes a keynote address by a prominent scholar or practitioner, breakout sessions in which students work together on activities related to specific leadership issues such as conflict management and team building, and special presentations by students on leadership class projects.

The fourth component, the Leadership and Technology Practicum, enables students to develop their expertise in mediated communication and to create media resources related to leadership development for other students’ use. These activities and resources include Learning to Lead, a television program featuring the leaders who speak in the Leadership Forum on current leadership issues with students; E-Leadership, an electronic newsletter about leadership, produced by the Center for Organizational Development and Leadership, and for which students are invited to submit essays and review popular books related to leadership; and the Video Lecture Database, a collection of public presentations made at Rutgers by organizational leaders. These leaders include the area vice president of U.S. sales for Cisco Systems, Carlos Dominguez; the former Bell Atlantic and Verizon president and chief operating officer, Jim Cullen; and Presi-

![Figure 1. The five components of the Student Leadership Development Institute (SLDI).](image-url)
dent Emeritus of Oregon State University John Byrne. Students also have access to the Integrated Leadership Web site, which furnishes information about leadership-related programs and events at Rutgers and elsewhere.

The fifth component, Leadership Research and Development, gives certificate students hands-on leadership experience. Students may work for a sponsoring organization as paid interns, or they may work with a faculty member and sponsoring organization on a research, development, or educational project.

Assessment of Outcomes

The SLDI opened its doors to its first group of students in fall 2001, following a yearlong study of comparable programs offered elsewhere and an assessment of Rutgers' needs and activities related to leadership development. Since then, the first courses have been refined, new courses have been added, and a comprehensive approach to leadership development has evolved. In many ways, however, the SLDI continues to be a work in progress, with expansion, evaluation, and continual improvement as ongoing priorities.

A comprehensive approach to evaluation is being developed to help in the assessment of the effectiveness of the program relative to its goals and aspirations. The first component of the assessment framework is now in place. This consists of students' both formally and informally evaluating individual courses and instructors. Also, feedback is regularly gathered from student participants at various lectures, meetings, and events associated with SLDI. All such information is preliminary because of the short period of time that the SLDI has been operating. In the months ahead, an attempt will be made to extend the assessment framework to identify students' expectations at the point of entry and then track how those expectations are realized, and perhaps modified, during the course of participation.

As a part of the assessment plan, a more systematic strategy for information gathering relative to workplace leadership needs will be undertaken, building on existing literature reviews in this area (Ruben, 2003; Ruben & DeAngelis, 1998). This information gathering will be in the form of surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews. We also plan to initiate a systematic program of follow-up research with the SLDI program graduates.

Conclusion

Leadership development is a primary responsibility of colleges and universities. The Student Leadership Development Institute at Rutgers University is one model for leadership development education that meets established criteria for such programs. In this article, we briefly have described the initiative, its theoretical orientation, and its intended impact. The SLDI represents a systematic and proactive approach to leadership education, one in which, we hope, will tap the reservoir of human leadership potential.

NOTES

1. Dr. Howard Prince is currently the director of the Center for Ethical Leadership at the University of Texas' Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs. He was founding dean and the first faculty member of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies and the first head of the Department of Behavioral Sciences and Leadership at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.

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