# Administrators' Descriptions of Their Leadership Roles in a Precollege Program

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## Abstract

The purpose of this work is to describe how leaders of the Upward Bound (UB) program at a university in the western United States described their leadership roles in the program. It is a qualitative study based on data drawn from interviews, observations, written material, and field observations conducted over two years. Participants described their leadership roles as helper, guide, and protector. These roles highlighted the nurturing part they felt they played in their students' and program's success. Participants varied widely in their understanding of leadership and their roles. Most relied on *ad hoc* or common sense conceptions to guide them in describing their roles. This work suggests that UB leaders and others who often come from non-leadership backgrounds may benefit from formal and informal leadership training.

## Introduction

This work describes how administrators of Upward Bound (UB), one of the Federal TRiO educational opportunities programs, at a university in the western United States described their leadership roles in the program. The question guiding the study is: How do administrators in an educational opportunities program define their roles as leaders in the program? In describing their leadership roles as helper, guide, and protector, participants emphasized the nurturing part they played in their students' and program's success.

The purpose of this work is to look at the perceptions of street-level bureaucrats in an educational organization that provides supplementary academic support to public school students and to provide relevant information to university-based leadership preparation programs about how front-line administrators describe

| Formal Role | Self-described Roles | Common Role Themes |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Program Administrator | • Gatekeeper<br>• Curriculum Developer<br>• Grant Writer | |
| Team Leader | • Disciplinarian<br>• Coach<br>• Listener<br>• Advocate | Helper<br><br>Guide<br><br>Protector |
| Residential Supervisor | • Middle Man<br>• Guide<br>• Actor | |
| Academic Advisor | • Rubber Wall<br>• Facilitator | |
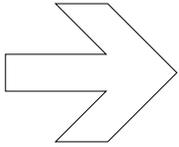
Figure 1. Participants' formal roles and self-described roles

**Participants' Insights on Leader Roles: Common Themes**

Each study participant offered insights about leadership and their leader roles that resonate in practice with what we know at an academic level. Some common themes relating to leadership and leaders' role conceptions emerged from the interview data. Those themes—leader as helper, leader as guide, and leader as protector—are described here.

**Leader as Helper**

The first common theme that arose from the data was that of leader as helper. A helper may be described as someone who assists, supports, or facilitates. The director, when cataloguing what she looked for in new hires described the role of helper thusly: "We're about working with kids, about getting them on the right track, about helping them overcome these barriers, and sometimes a lot of the stuff that goes on in dealing with a bunch of kids doesn't feel very much like helping somebody get ready to go to college. But if you are helping them cope with the death of a family member so that they can then get their act together, so they can get their homework done, so they can go to class, then that is helping them go to college."

One TL described above how as a coach he helped students run the gauntlet of getting into college. Speaking of his previous year's experience as a TL, he shared, "I felt that there was a very positive opportunity to assist in the purpose of the project as well as to kind of go the extra mile in the sense of helping [students] to find their way to the details of college." In referring to the responsibilities of

themselves as leaders in the vernacular. University-based educational leadership programs can use these empirical data to identify gaps in our understanding of leadership in educational settings and enhance leaders' capacity for leadership practice. This work also seeks to enhance understanding of educational leadership in the vernacular by giving voice to a group whose insights have not yet been explored with much detail with the hope that their insights may both bring nuance to our understanding of teaching leadership and help expand the scope of who receives formalized leadership training.

## Review of Relevant Literature and Rationale for the Study

The concept of leadership generally remains ambiguous in the literature, and an extensive body of conceptual and empirical literature on leadership in organizations exists (Bass, 1990; Kezar, 2005; Rost, 1991; Yukl, 1994). In their own review of leadership literature, Leithwood and Riehl (2003) asserted that "at the core of most definitions of leadership are two functions: providing direction and exercising influence" (p. 2). Likewise, the body of work on leadership in schools and other educational organizations is massive (Bensimon, Neumann, & Birnbaum, 1989; Crow & Grogan, 2004; Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006; Leithwood & Duke, 1999). However, in all this work, relatively few studies of leadership in precollege programs have been conducted, and of that work, only a handful have been conducted on leadership in the Upward Bound and other related federal TRiO programs (Wallace, Ropers-Huilmann, & Abel, 2004).

Along with the abundant work on leadership generally, extensive work exists on leadership preparation and leadership role conceptions (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Crow & Grogan, 2004). Empirical work describing how leaders conceptualize leadership and their roles as leaders has grown (Barker, 2001). The separate branches of work on distributed leadership (Gronn, 2003; Spillane, 2006), organizational and institutional theory (Ogawa & Bossert, 1995; Ogawa, Crowson, & Goldring, 1999), and trust (Tschannen-Moran, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998) within the field of educational leadership represent a move to recognize how relationships with others influence leaders' role development. However, little work relating to leadership definition and role conception within federal TRiO and other precollege programs exists (Wallace, Abel, & Ropers-Huilmann, 2000; Wallace, Ropers-Huilmann, & Abel, 2004). Studies on TRiO and other precollege programs have primarily focused on their impacts on students, particularly on their graduation rates and continued enrollments in postsecondary institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). However, no examination of the connection between the administrative training these program leaders receive and

student effects has been made. While empirical and conceptual literature relating to administrator effects on students exists (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Pounder, Ogawa, & Adams, 1995), no analog to that work is found with the UB program. Work relating to precollege academic programs' impacts exists (Gullat & Tan, 2003), but this work focuses more on impact of services rather than impact of purveyors of those services.

The program under study is an example of an academic support organization with a well-defined and straight-forward leadership purpose: to motivate students to graduate from high school and enter college. While programs targeted to meet these students' needs typically hire administrative professionals with advanced degrees, a search of personnel at various UB sites reveals that those hired often come from fields such as social work and public administration. Thus, the site under study provided an interesting venue to examine how leaders without formal leadership training describe leadership and their leadership roles.

## Methods

This study uses qualitative data drawn from interviews, observations, and other sources to paint a picture of how administrators in UB at western university in western city, USA, conceptualize leadership and their leadership roles. A qualitative approach seemed most appropriate due to the nature of the questions involved in the study. Qualitative research is a complex set of terms, concepts, and assumptions that seek to interpret meaning in contexts that may not work as well for quantitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). It involves "the studied use and collection of a variety of materials . . . that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals' lives" (p. 5). In practice, this means that researchers try to get an interpretive knowledge of their participants' meanings by having participants verify, refute, or modify what they intend to say as they see fit (Charmaz, 2003).

This study is written from a constructivist perspective. The constructivist approach assumes that researchers can create knowledge together with research participants. Epistemologically, the constructivist approach assumes that the reality of the organizational structure of educational organizations is constructed within a relative context (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Data for this study came from participants' reflections on their own experiences. They described their actions, they interpreted their lived experiences, and they reflected on and clarified with the author what those experiences meant in terms of describing leadership. (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003). In order to provide a robust explanation of the methods used in this study, this section describes the UB program and the study's

participants and then gives some details about the data collection and analysis techniques that were used.

**Description of the Upward Bound Program and Study Participants**

The UB program serves as an interesting educational organization in which to examine leadership due to the unique mandate it follows as a precollege educational opportunities program. UB refers to one of several grant-funded initiatives developed by the Higher Education Act of 1965. UB is one of six programs collectively known as the Federal TRiO programs. These programs provide educational outreach designed to support students from underprivileged backgrounds. In terms of educational leadership, the program is specifically designed to encourage students to attend college. The classic UB program serves high school students from low-income families, high school students from families in which neither parent holds a bachelor's degree, and low-income, first-generation military veterans who are preparing to enter postsecondary education. According to program literature, "Upward Bound provides fundamental support to participants in their preparation for college entrance" (U.S. Department of Education, 2005, p. 1) by giving those enrolled college preparatory experiences that enrich their understanding of what postsecondary life will be like and that encourage them to believe they can be successful at college. UB's goal is to increase participants' postsecondary enrollment and graduation rates. The program encompasses several projects that provide academic instruction, tutoring, counseling, mentoring, cultural enrichment, and work-study.

The Western University Upward Bound Summer Academic Enrichment Program (UB Summer Program) is one of several academic supports WU offers for high school and college students. The UB Summer Program offers high schoolers an intensive immersion into college by placing students in university dorms and letting them take classes for high school credit or remediation. During their time in the summer program at Western University, high school students spend six weeks (Monday-Friday) living on campus while taking classes in mathematics, laboratory sciences, English composition, literature, foreign languages, and electives. During their time on campus, students are supervised by team leaders (TLs) responsible for groups of about 12 students each, teachers, tutors, and other UB staff.

Of the approximately 20 total administrators and staff who oversee the UB Summer Program at WU, five staff and administrators who managed the Bridge/JumpStart component (serving graduating high school seniors and incoming college freshmen) of the UB Summer Program participated in the study. These five adults served as informants for a previous study (Author, 2007) on

student participation in leadership practices. Two participants were former students within the program, and three had spent at least two years with the program. Three women and two men participated in the study. One female participant represented a multiethnic background, and the other four participants were white. The leaders interviewed for this study represented a broad range of age and experience. All participants came from backgrounds outside the world of public education, and none has received an undergraduate degree in secondary education. Nonetheless, participants had ample personal and career experience in developing their individual leadership capacities. Participants were chosen based on their knowledge of the social processes examined (i.e., they were leaders in the program) to generate as many categorical properties as possible (Charmaz, 2003; Fontana & Frey, 2003; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

*Data Collection and Analysis*

A major goal for the study was to come up with a robust description of how individuals described their participation in organizational leadership processes (Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Although choosing a purposive sample renders generalization from the study impossible, the purposive sample enabled the author to interview students who had spent time with the program as high school students and who had a robust set of experiences to reflect on (Bernard, 2002). Data drawn over two years from interviews, site observations, and UB documents were transcribed, coded, and analyzed using the techniques described by Strauss and Corbin (1998). The constant comparative method was used in conjunction with theoretical sampling, a direct method of testing researcher assumptions about emerging concepts in the data by specific participant selection.

An interview strategy similar to that outlined by Creswell (1998) was used. The author conducted two interviews, one to gather information and one to follow up with each of the five leaders. Two, one- to two-hour-long semi-structured, informal interviews with each participant were digitally recorded and transcribed with accompanying field notes using Corbin and Strauss' (1998) methods for note taking. Interviews were followed by two to three hours of participant observation.

For the semi-structured interviews, the author developed and tested a protocol that included questions about participants' backgrounds, how they became involved with the program, how they conceptualized leadership, whether and how they felt they participated in the program's leadership practices, who made decisions in the program and how, what parts they played in the program, and what expectations they had of program administration, staff, and students. Additionally, participants

were asked to provide anecdotes about times when they influenced how the UB program carried out its leadership functions.

Although the primary source of data was in-depth interviews with participants, multiple sources were used in an effort to triangulate findings and look for disconfirming evidence in an effort to assure that the study's findings were trustworthy (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Yin, as cited in Creswell, 1998). Additionally, criteria of authenticity (i.e., fairness, improved experience, increased understanding, the facilitation and simulation of action, and the ability to act toward change) were used to enhance the trustworthiness of the study's findings (Lincoln & Guba, 2003). In addition to conducting interviews and taking field notes, documents that related to participants' experiences at the site were analyzed, including newsletters, correspondence with peers and administration, and participants' personal journal entries relating to their experiences both within and outside the field site. The author's and participants' reflexive journals were used as a triangulation source. The findings and discussion that follow reflect the results of the above described data collection and analysis.

## Findings

Several insights into how UB leaders described their leadership roles in the program emerged from the study data (see Figure 1). While leaders in the program saw themselves fulfilling many roles (e.g., administrator, teacher, mentor, tutor, career counselor, etc.) that would be seen in the average school setting, they had unique experiences with students and constraints to their ability to act that shaped their ability to administer to their students' academic, social, and emotional needs. Although the primary goals of the program remained academic, the overall feel of the program was much more intimate, creating unique leadership opportunities and challenges for program staff and administrators that went beyond what would be found in schools. What follows here is a discussion of participants' insights on their roles as leaders.

TLs, another TL described her expectation that they provide "support. So, if something is happening in my team with some students, and I need to be with some students, and I can't be with all of them, I expect other TL's to be able to help me out. And either take on my kids or keep an eye out for them. And I also expect them to help me enforce whatever policy is being implemented this week."

An academic advisor, relating her perspective of how WU's UB program went beyond the minimum to help students, noted, "If you ask the federal government our only job is to get them to college. But that is not enough for the administration staff. We want to see them succeed in college. We want to see them succeed in life. So we do try and give them the writing abilities that they need, the critical thinking abilities that they need, the social interaction ability to be able to go to an interview and successfully complete that interview, successfully network and make friends with the people they work with and the people they hang out with and the people they are going to work together with on administrative levels once they get to college and even in high school." She also shared, "I think that one of the things this program does in its classes, and in its activities, and even in tutoring is we try to help people realize what their leadership capabilities are within them and to use their strengths to affect others in a positive way and help them choose to use their negative energy differently so that they're constantly being positive leaders." For all participants, a leader in UB acted as a helper in order to assist students successfully get through high school, enter college, and develop personal and academic skills, a sentiment reflected by the residential supervisor: "I try to show them that there are people in this world that care about their success and their future."

**Leader as Guide**

The second common theme that emerged was leader as guide. The role of guide may be defined as one who brings others along, provides direction, or shows the way. Like a helper, a guide gives assistance, but that aid tends to refer to actions taken along a journey and aimed at a destination. The director, by virtue of her formal position, acted as a guide for the overall program. She noted, "We're about working with kids, about getting them on the right track." This role of leader as guide was demonstrated through the parts she played in curriculum development and grant writing. By so doing, she gave the program a comprehensive structure and set of rules to follow. In his role as coach, one participant looked for ways to draw from his own experiences to assist the program to "bring people into college successfully." He declared, "I find my power mostly in helping [students] to see the clear route into college. . . . I can use my experience and help them to understand what steps I've taken—what doesn't work, what does work, pretty much in any topic that has to do with financial aid, or majors, or whatever." The

residential supervisor's use of words such as "guide," "direct," and "show" to describe his actions reiterated his conception of what it means to be a leader: "one who guides, counsels, hopefully moves people in a common direction toward the goal." One TL shared information about how she fulfilled the role of guide with students. She observed that as a TL, "you really feel the potential to either guide someone: 'And I trust you entirely to do better,' or if they really irritate you to shatter their confidence or their trust." In her roles as rubber wall and facilitator, an academic advisor likewise noted, "I try to guide them in a way that would benefit them, but always leaving with decisions up to them."

## Leader as Protector

The final common theme to come out of the data was leader as protector. The role of protector can take on very different meanings depending on the point of view of the protector and the protected. To protect means to defend, look after, or save from harm. One participant's actions meant to protect could be viewed by another participant as resulting in unintended harm. One TL, in his roles as coach and disciplinarian described above, had a particular philosophy of his role as protector. As noted above he stated, "I play the part of the first time they have actually been disciplined." Taking his comments in context, this participant recognized that discipline can be a harsh word to describe the idea he was getting at. Inasmuch as discipline refers to directed instruction rather than simple punishment, his word choice seemed to reflect a desire to protect students from ingrained expectations he perceived in their communities: "I play the part of the first time they've ever been believed in or encouraged to be successful in something besides being an auto mechanic or something like that. I mean I see myself as one of the first times in their lives that they've been introduced to ideas beyond the mundane and the normal."

The observations of one TL make for a telling contrast. As a woman of color, this TL related that "there's a certain cultural understanding that's larger than just being part of a university. . . . And I can relate to [students] when they just want [to talk about their] feelings. . . . I can talk to them about because I've been there. . . . I notice a lot of the TLs aren't really of color, and I don't think they can offer the same to students, and so I see and hear and watch things that don't necessarily seem culturally sensitive or I guess the TL is really culturally aware. . . . I identify with the students that are turned away or not understood, too, because I've had the same experience going to high schools and growing up in [this community]." Unlike white TLs, she saw her capacity to identify with students' experiences as giving her the ability to offer students an emotional buffer that guarded them from others' cultural insensitivities.

The residential supervisor's comments referent to his roles in the program resonate with the role of protector. His notions of trying to "provide a secure environment," "maintain discipline," and "teach [students] the concept of authority" where it lacked in the home all reflected a desire to look out for students as he acted out his authoritarian role. An academic advisor's comments about "letting them feel that they are important, that their goals are important" reflect her role as emotional safeguard for students. Again, contrasting the residential supervisor's and the academic advisor's perspectives provides insight into the different ways the role of protector looked in practice among study participants.

The program director's role as protector came out as she described her expectations for program staff: "A commitment that says, 'Here's how I can help the program and not hurt the program.' So I expect that." This expectation of commitment to the program and its success at helping students get to college extended to program students. She counted on students to recognize that "They're a little bit special and that they have been chosen to have an opportunity, and by having been chosen they're taking up the space of somebody else that maybe would have benefited also. So, it's not a gratitude thing, but it is an acknowledgment that "I have this thing, and therefore I need to take advantage of it."

As the program's gatekeeper, the director had the authority to deny entry to students with potential behavioral problems or to ask students who do not meet her expectations once enrolled to leave the program. By demanding from students that they take advantage of the program, she was able to ensure the continued viability of the program for students in future years and thus fulfill her role as protector.

The above described insights into how UB leaders define leadership and leader roles tend to resonate with what we know about leadership in other educational settings. The leaders interviewed for this study seemed to see leadership as a goal-driven social influence process partaken by many people throughout UB. At a high level of abstraction, this is nothing new. What *are* new are the places where leadership takes place and who is eligible to participate. Perhaps due to the small number of students enrolled, the disposition of leaders or students, or other factors not elaborated upon, students had ample voice in the program, and leaders' role descriptions reflected a strong orientation to meeting constituent needs.

# Discussion and Conclusion

This study provided some insight into how UB leaders described their leadership roles in the program and provided a perspective of educational leadership in the vernacular from a nontraditional school setting. This study also provided some insight into the limitations of leaving leaders, especially new ones, alone to define leadership in the vernacular. The findings of the study indicate that, like leaders in traditional school settings, the leaders at this site varied widely in how they understood leadership. From a normative perspective, judgments can be made about this group's strengths and weaknesses that may be relevant to people seeking to train similar groups of leaders.

On the positive side, it appeared that all study participants wanted to lead. They had a disposition and a belief that they could influence the young people in their care as well as their peers. Participants seemed to understand points about leadership such as goal orientation, social influence, and the notion that it is an organizational phenomenon. They clearly seemed to see that leadership is an inherently uplifting process. For leadership educators, having a group already predisposed to understanding that leadership should carry with it a sense of social consciousness and altruism makes teaching how to act on those dispositions much easier.

On the negative side, participants tended to go with their gut rather than drawing from a leadership knowledge base specific to the UB context. Moreover, actions taken by participants drawing from individual leadership ideas led to a wide range of behaviors that sometimes conflicted with the program's goals. While the younger leaders of this study expressed confidence and enthusiasm about their leadership roles, their responses also pointed to holes in their understanding of how to lead youth. Except for the program director, participants seemed to lack a sophisticated understanding of how to apply leadership concepts specific to the context of working with high-school-age youth. They tended to universalize their personal experiences to the specific challenges they faced as UB leaders without drawing from the educational leadership knowledge base. With similar groups, leadership educators need to emphasize the complexity of the leadership process and instill within their students an understanding of how to view leadership challenges from multiple perspectives or theoretical frameworks. Moreover, leadership educators need to point their students not only to literature that describes what is common about leadership in multiple contexts, but also what is known about the unique challenges of leading people in specific arenas.

The gap between study participants' dispositions and understanding of the complexities of leadership suggests that both formal and informal training in leadership concepts and their application to this UB site would help build participants' leadership capacity. The findings of this study indicate that administrators of programs such as UB should note that their programs are not just an educational opportunity for the youth they serve, but an opportunity for undergraduate and graduate college student TAs to learn vital leadership skills for themselves. In the site under study, it appears that the potential of such adult training remains to be explored more deeply.

At the time of the study, formal leadership training in the WU UB Program consisted of a two-day orientation session and an optional ROPES session. Adult staff met for an hour each week during the six-week summer sessions to discuss students' academic and behavioral progress. Beyond these meetings, no other formal training was given, and staff members typically relied on the wisdom of staff members with more time in the program to learn the ropes. As a result, staff members developed an informal sense of the implicit norms and goals of the summer program, and they frequently drew from their own experiences to supplement the initial formal meetings held by the program.

Regarding the effectiveness of such an approach, Townsend (2002) noted that it appears one-shot programs add awareness, but are not effective in bringing about true learning and behavior changes. Other leadership education researchers have suggested approaches that may achieve more lasting effects. Hackman, Kirlin, and Tharp's (2004) prescriptive leadership development model of coursework, community service, skill building, and mentoring would be a good fit in contexts similar to UB in that such a model could be incorporated into the program's existing organizational structure, particularly in programs that have components similar to the WU UB Summer Program. Huber's (2002) leadership training framework consisting of reflecting, connecting, deciding, and doing would complement the prescriptive leadership development model and set the stage for leadership development activities within that model. In terms of reflecting, the self-assessment inventory developed by Culp and Cox (2002) could serve both as a formative assessment of new leaders' understanding of leadership as well as a guide for training. Two modes of connecting, through stories (Albert & Vadla, 2009) and building learning communities (Nahavandi, 2006) would serve to help leaders understand the challenges and opportunities of leading groups of youth such as those in WU's UB Program. Finally, real-world modeling, such as Langone's (2004) Citizen Leader Model approach for teaching strategic leadership and role playing, as suggested by Guenthner and Moore (2005) would allow leaders to apply their understanding to real-world contexts. Such training would positively impact leaders' understanding of the students they lead and

would likely result in more consistent and coordinated leadership actions that would enhance programs' capacity to fulfill their mission of serving youth such as those in the UB Program.

To conclude, the judgments and suggestions mentioned here are not intended to be an indictment of this particular program, but rather they have been made to underscore potential lessons to be learned by leadership educators about what they can learn from leaders' day-to-day descriptions of leadership in order to prescriptively and deliberately improve individuals' and organizations' leadership capacity. Hopefully the same lessons discovered in this study may be used as a resource for leadership educators training leaders engaged in similar programs.

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