

Co-Curricular Leadership Education: Considering Critical Questions

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Abstract

This article highlights the importance of examining the ways that leadership educators approach leadership education on college campuses. It also raises questions by which co-curricular leadership educators can re-evaluate how they prepare students for leadership that is relevant to meet the challenges of today's world. Through these questions educators are encouraged to re-examine their practice and consider areas in which they can challenge the status quo to provide more mindful leadership education that prepares students for lifelong learning and the flexibility to tackle the challenges of an increasingly complex global society.

Introduction

Most college campuses do not have the luxury of hiring a large team of leadership experts whose sole job it is to provide high quality leadership programs and experiences for all students on campus. Instead, one or two individuals may be charged with executing co-curricular leadership education activities in addition to an array of other responsibilities. Or, perhaps, leadership education may fall into the other duties as assigned category of the job description. Often leadership programs become part of professionals' juggling acts where they are but one of many priorities.

In an effort to encourage leadership practices on campus, best practices are adopted from other institutions, retreats and skill-building workshops are executed, courses offered, and programs created when the need arises (Eich,

2005). But, how often do leadership educators take a step back and question what we do? How often do we challenge ourselves or ask students to challenge the effectiveness of our programs? A critical examination of college student co-curricular leadership education is necessary to ensure that every piece of our programs is truly making the difference that we say it does and providing students with a complementary experience that effectively exposes them to both curricular and co-curricular aspects of leadership. No program is ever perfect, which allows us the opportunity to be constantly re-evaluating our work and the means by which we are achieving it or falling short. The questions that follow are without easy answers; instead, they offer a way to think about how co-curricular leadership education is both structured and delivered to college students.

How Do We Balance Individual Student Needs With Those Of An Organization Or The Entire Student Body?

It is challenging to design programs that fully address the specific needs of every individual or groups of individuals on a campus. Although many colleges emphasize the importance of leadership training, corresponding resources to make this aim reality often remain limited (Fitz & Brown, 1998; Smart, Ethington, Riggs, & Thompson, 2002). Developing student leaders is often assigned to a handful of staff members who may or may not have enough time or funds to have the breadth of effect that they, or the institution, would desire. This strain on human and monetary resources creates the need for prioritizing what is important and how to reach the greatest number of students with the available resources. Such a paradigm creates a view of student leadership at a macro level.

Haber (2006) discussed a comprehensive leadership program model that accounts for strategies and structures that are open to all students, targeted for specific groups of students, or focused on students in particular leadership positions. Many leadership programs and training opportunities focus on campuses' positional leaders and "professionals should consider the degree to which they engage nonpositional members of student organizations in conversations and training related to leadership development" (Dugan, 2006, p. 342). Although these programs might be open to any club president or resident assistant to participate, they are more often than not structured for students who have already been able to exhibit a certain aptitude for leadership to their peers, faculty, or staff. With this being the criterion, does every student actually have equal access to leadership on campus? Or, do leadership programs focus on students who have already shown some capacity and interest, however big or small, to engage in leadership?

The model that Haber (2006) outlined accounts for the need to enhance leadership training, education, and development opportunities for any student on campus, not just those already in a position of influence or power. Although this model can

translate to developing leaders at multiple stages of development, it might also encourage educators to focus on group needs as opposed to individual student learning. As Kezar and Moriarty (2000) confirmed, leadership development practices must employ different strategies that better reflect the diversity of a student body and the unique variations that exist within it. The individuals that make up a group influence what program needs exist and what services the group desires.

The balance between individual student needs and group level needs is a delicate one. While leadership education must take into account individual needs, it must also situate the individual student within a wider context of complex interactions. Morse (1989) explained that leadership development must be defined in terms much broader than the individual. Such training must go “beyond the skills of one person to functions that people, families, communities, and even nations can exhibit” (p. 47). Training student leaders must capture what is referred to in liberal education as “a narrative imagination, the ability to enter into worldviews and experiences other than one’s own” (Schneider, 2005, p. 66). While we seek to develop the individual student leader, that leadership capacity will ultimately exist in a world that demands individuals understand multiple points of view and navigate among them.

A one-size-fits-all approach has inherent limitations. It is also unrealistic to expect that enough time and resources exist on any campus to customize leadership development education for every student. So, how do we collectively draw a line that creates leadership programs and curricula that are both open and relevant to all students on our campuses? One possibility is to shift our frame to what Ostick (2006) described as “leadership education, training, and development” (p. 103) that is focused on “an understanding of leadership as a social construction, viewed within context and through group membership” (p. 103). It is worth evaluating leadership programs through their capacity to simultaneously develop individual awareness within the environment of complicated interpersonal interactions and responsibility as a member of a group.

What Is The Definition Of Leadership And Who Defines It?

There is increasing concern in the field of leadership studies about the need for programs to be grounded by a definition of leadership (Rost, 1993; Stech, 2007). Before we can seek to educate leaders do we not first need to know the aim and nature of leadership we hope to encourage? We must be able to imagine our end goal of what leadership would look like before we can begin the journey to arrive there.

The potential for student impact in any leadership program should begin with intention. Leadership education programs can be better tailored to student needs when they are clearly focused around the approach to leadership they want to foster in students. Many factors can influence how a particular program chooses to define leadership from institutional mission to the type of student populations that particular program serves. Because this definition can vary based on values and needs, a solid identification of the type of leadership that is the presumed outcome for students allows leadership educators to make decisions about resources and outreach that best support their definition. Rost (1993) clearly identified that “the issue of defining leadership is central to the problems both scholars and practitioners have had with conceptualizing and practicing leadership” (p. 37). It is important to communicate what definition of leadership we use to ground our work because it informs the decisions leadership educators make in program delivery and initiatives. This, in turn, directly impacts the experience that students will have on a particular campus in regards to their journey of learning leadership.

The question of who defines leadership for a particular program is an important one because of the far-reaching consequences that this clarity of purpose provides. Stech (2007) stated that in the process of developing leaders it is critical to first identify a set of criteria to define good and effective leadership. The subjectivity of such criteria must be considered and tempered with an awareness of who that criteria best serves and who it might exclude. When we begin the process of educating students about leadership, do we point to a singular all-encompassing definition of leadership or to an array of different ideas? From whose perspective are we viewing leadership, and are we even aware we are looking through that lens? It is, indeed, a balancing act. Fundamentally, though, we must be willing to regularly revisit our program’s definition of leadership and how it does or does not serve the needs of our students at any given time.

Ultimately, one purpose of leadership education is that of preparing students to tackle the complex leadership challenges that they will face in their professional and personal lives. As Morse (1989) purported, “Leadership like citizenship is multidimensional. As many institutions develop a leadership component, they move beyond the narrow definition and get students (and themselves) to understand and practice a new brand of leadership that is inculcated in every aspect of life and work” (p. 49). Our ability to capture this multidimensionality in our framing of leadership education is a formidable task, but one that certainly begins through attention to how we conceive of leadership.

Are We Providing Students With The Skills To Continue Learning Leadership In Different Contexts Or Simply To Enact Leadership As It Is Defined In A Classroom?

The world that our student leaders experience is increasingly one of globalization and interconnectedness (Bremer, 2006; Ostick, 2006). Thus, it is a reasonable corresponding goal to prepare our students for leadership that can function in this complex reality. When we picture the emerging leaders of this generation, we imagine those who embody the ability to transcend individual interests and to function in a way that sees the systemic implications of actions that are inextricably connected to others around the globe. As Ostick contended, “The questions of and answers for ‘leadership for whom?’, ‘leadership about whom?’, and ‘leadership to what end?’ are becoming recognized as more relevant in our pluralistic society” (p. 103). For students to develop leadership potential that can function in this reality, their capacity for comfort and confidence in engaging across difference is indispensable (Bremer, 2006).

Leadership education has certainly been moving towards addressing this need by more recent leadership models that seek to deconstruct leadership as simply a positional role and see it more as a relational process with individuals and groups working toward positive change (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2006). As we continue to find ways to expose students to the relational elements of leadership, we are better able to help them reach a level of understanding of the complexities that arise when multiple perspectives are present. Regardless, we must continuously be asking ourselves if we are simply providing students with a cookie-cutter approach to leadership as opposed to helping them develop the capacities and skills necessary to function fluidly in a global society.

To imagine that in the span of the college years we can teach students everything they will need for the rest of their lives in terms of truly global leadership is an idyllic notion. Rather than fixating on content in leadership education, we should devote our attention to cultivating ways of being for our student leaders that will better equip them for the novel experiences they will encounter throughout their lives. Schneider (2005) stressed the importance of preparing students for life in a world that is constantly changing and that to do so effectively requires exposing students to liberal learning that will offer them ways to “grapple with the new and unscripted problems they can expect to find in every sphere of life” (p. 66). To this end, leadership education can provide the means to prepare students for a path of lifelong learning that will keep them engaged in processes in which they seek to communicate and exist across difference and constant change.

Freedman (2003) emphasized that “liberal education seeks to impress upon students that one of the most important words in the English language is

‘perhaps,’ and that we would all do better if we prefaced our most emphatic statements with that modest qualifier” (p. 58). The classroom environment can create a vacuum in which students learn about leadership in its theoretical and seemingly simplest form. The real world application of such leadership theory is invariably more intangible and far from straightforward. How can we help bridge that gap for our students? In part it happens by providing students with opportunities for actual leadership practice where they can experience the uncertainty and flexibility that leadership demands. Durden (2007) highlighted the roots of American higher education as driven to induce learning that “easily traversed the boundaries between the classroom and the community, an education in which the lessons of the academy could be applied immediately to a society seeking to define its own parameters” (p. 40). Finding opportunities to connect the cognitive understanding of leadership with application for our students is paramount.

How Far Do We Stretch Ourselves Outside Of Our Opinions And Beliefs In And Out Of The Classroom?

Leadership educators’ biases and preferences can have a profound effect on their interactions with students. As Stech (2008) suggested, “An important ingredient of successful leadership is that the leader should have a core set of beliefs and values which are then made evident and become the basis for influencing others” (p.43). Stech’s assertion is certainly relevant for students as they develop a deeper understanding of leadership, but it is perhaps even more relevant for the educators who are influencing students based on their core values and beliefs. It is natural for leadership educators to gravitate to one group of leadership theories more than others, but what does that mean for the theories and models that are not preferred by educators? Are those theories given the same attention in the educational process?

Students are asked to be critical consumers of information presented in the classroom, but first educators should examine if their material represents the full spectrum of ideas, theories, and models of leadership. If the goal is to train critical thinkers who can engage in leadership across a myriad of cultural and other contexts, then students need to engage in the practice of imagining multiple perspectives and viewpoints. Leadership education cannot happen through a prescribed lens or a small subset of certain leadership theories. Exposure to contradictory or paradoxical information can encourage students to make personal meaning of what they are learning and what leadership means to them.

Similarly, how often do we provide the opportunity for students to undertake a thorough critique of the models that we have shared with them? Durden (2007) argued that “we need to focus on ways to engage students in a seamless

experience that moves easily and naturally in and out of the classroom” (p. 44). Critiquing leadership models and theories in a classroom discussion is one thing, but critiquing them based on everyday experiences is another. Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning supports the need for active experimentation and experiencing concrete events. Classroom simulations and exercises only go so far, and leadership educators who stretch their students’ learning to places outside the classroom are more likely to incorporate these other ways to learn about leadership as a process.

How Can We Measure Successful Programs If What We Aim To Teach Is Part Of A Lifelong Journey Of Learning?

Effective leadership programs cannot be fully measured by a simple survey or questionnaire. To understand the full impact of leadership education on students, we must be committed to more complex processes of evaluation (DiPaolo, 2008). The process of leadership development is a multifarious one that requires a corresponding set of mixed measurements. Among the dimensions of assessing this broader sense of success, other considerations include how to measure how our programs have strengthened students’ critical thinking abilities, their ability to interact with others who are different from them, and how confident they are to confront new and difficult situations.

Upcraft and Schuh (1996) offered several principles of good practice for assessment and also stressed that “assessment is most effective when it reflects an understanding of organizational outcomes as multidimensional, integrated, and revealed in performance over time” (p. 22). Additionally, the authors highlighted that “assessment requires attention to outcomes but also, and just as important, to the processes that lead to them” (p. 23). In this increasingly assessment-driven era of higher education, it is easy to fixate on numbers from satisfaction surveys and event attendance as measures of success. Those numbers actually tell us very little about how students have expanded the skills, abilities, and knowledge necessary to effectively engage in the lifelong practice of leadership. There is no singular leadership measure that can expound upon the complete picture of leadership development. So, it is imperative that campus assessments of leadership continue to expand and account for a broader range of measures to uncover leadership development as a process for students, and less of a quantifiable outcome.

DiPaolo (2008) posited that “perhaps the next step in leadership education research is to look deeply into the lives of students and document learning about leadership across the lifespan” (p. 87). Connecting what we know about leadership development during college to pre- and post-college research only helps to clarify the impact of the collegiate experience during this journey. Assessment measures are most effective when they are ongoing as opposed to

capturing only a snapshot of a student's experience (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996). If the college experience is thought of as a brief episode in the life of a student, then there are an infinite number of other points of experience to explore. Research that connects these various experiences and explores how they intersect and influence one another would provide a more complete understanding of leadership development throughout one's lifetime.

Summary

Many of the questions presented throughout this article are not new to the field of leadership education, and neither is the lack of definitive answers. Rather than getting bogged down in the specific answers, though, it is the questions themselves that hold the most promise. These are critical questions which often get lost in the shuffle of our other duties as assigned, but issues like these push us to think bigger and challenge our existing practices. Ultimately, this change produces better outcomes for the students we serve.

Leadership education best serves the needs of students when it is able to expose them to the topic in a multitude of ways, theoretical and practical, through both curricular and co-curricular means. The ability of co-curricular programs to exist in a symbiotic relationship with curricular leadership efforts allows students to experience a truly varied approach to the practice of leadership. The questions raised in this article are one way to evaluate the strength of what should be a complementary relationship.

This article highlights the importance of modeling the way in terms of contrary opinions and thoughts, so that students are encouraged to explore the complexity of the leadership challenges they will encounter throughout their lives. The questions raised throughout the article may be aimed at leadership educators, but they are meant to represent a parallel set that should exist for students. When creating a culture of effective leadership development on college campuses, it is not simply a matter of professionals who must be asking themselves the critical and provocative questions about the tasks they undertake. We must also strive to empower students to engage in the challenging questions that further their own growth. When we enable students to ask these questions about the complexities of their own lives, then we will be one step closer to having our students realize the leadership that is needed in today's society.

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