

Business without the Math: Competing Discourses and the Struggle to Develop an Undergraduate Leadership Program

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Abstract

Despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of leadership education, undergraduate leadership degree programs in Canada are limited and, in some cases, struggling for survival. This case study examines the ways in which competing discourses of careerism, postsecondary

corporatization, liberal arts education, and business education impact an undergraduate leadership program's sustainability.

Introduction

In the last generation United States-based postsecondary programs and courses designed to develop leaders and leadership skills have shown remarkable growth (Dugan & Komives, 2007). In the years following the 1992 launch of the inaugural undergraduate leadership degree in the United States (Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, & Arensdorf, 2006), researchers have estimated that the number of leadership programs offered in the United States has grown to over 1000 (Scot cited in Dugan & Komives, 2007; Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). As a field of study, leadership cuts a broad swath through the educational landscape of the United States. By comparison, undergraduate leadership education in the Canadian postsecondary context is fairly new and very modest in scale. In the last 10 years only two undergraduate leadership degree programs have emerged within the Canadian university system. Although the number of graduate degrees in leadership offered by Canadian universities is slightly higher, they can still be counted in the low double digits (Henein & Morissette, 2007). While there is widespread recognition of the importance of building leadership capacity in Canada (Conference Board of Canada, 2004), the development of postsecondary leadership degree opportunities for students is still in its infancy, with at least one of the programs struggling for survival. In the worst case scenario, this program runs the risk of meeting the fate of early United States programs that is specifically “fad [ing] away (Greenwald, 2010).

The situation facing undergraduate leadership education in Canada provides a rich opportunity to explore the factors shaping leadership education's struggle to gain traction and credibility in a context that, on the one hand recognizes the importance of the discipline, but on the other hand contains obstacles to the affirmation of its place in postsecondary education. The current paper presents a case study of the complex array of internal and external factors that challenge the development and delivery of the undergraduate leadership program in which we teach. The paper considers the role of political and economic factors, stakeholder views towards liberal arts education, and discourses of postsecondary corporatization and careerism as factors shaping opportunities and roadblocks for undergraduate leadership program development in Canada. Strategies adopted to resist roadblocks and enable survival are also presented.

Literature Review and Context

Our leadership program was developed, and continues to operate, within a complex backdrop of external factors including debate regarding the viability and merits of a liberal arts education, the careerist orientation of students, the corporatization of postsecondary education, and the merits of postsecondary leadership education in general. To understand some of these challenges, we consider the contextual backdrop of the program.

Liberal Arts Education and Leadership: Influence of Government Funding and Careerism

Leadership programs are often embedded in, or associated with, liberal arts education, which offers a strong complement to the goals of leadership development. A liberal arts education, by covering diverse topics including social factors, science, culture, and contemporary issues from a number of different perspectives (Wren, Riggio, & Genovese, 2009), is designed to prepare students to actively engage in modern society in such a way that they will be sensitive to the past, but able to deal with the changing future and the more ambiguous aspects of everyday life (Barker, 2000; Wren et al., 2009). In recent years, discussions and debates have emerged regarding the place of a liberal arts education within universities. Canadian governments, for instance, have begun directing funding away from the liberal arts and into the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics disciplines – disciplines that have more obvious utility in the workplace (Cote & Allahar, 2011).

There is evidence that governments and the public (e.g., parents, prospective students, and employers) have shown increased support for applied programs such as business, teaching, information technology, and health studies as a path towards career specific employment (Groarke, 2009). According to Barker (2000), in a 1999 study nearly 75% of first year students suggested that their decision to go to college/university was based on the increased potential for employment and increased financial prospects. In the same survey, 68% planned to enroll in an applied (pre-professional or technical) program versus 28% that planned to enroll in a liberal arts program.

Recent research suggests that students are also increasingly focused on the instrumental or utilitarian value of their studies. Business students, for instance, have been labeled as “careerist to the core,” driven by a quest to determine the career potential of their degrees (Galt, 2010). The changing focus and understanding of postsecondary education as marked by a careerist orientation can also be seen in government priorities and university recruiting materials. Hansard (1999) reported that the provincial government of Ontario, led by the Progressive Conservative party under the leadership of Premier Mike Harris, opened a new session of the legislative assembly indicating that more people are seeking specialized skills and knowledge which means the government must work with Ontario’s post-secondary institutions in order to deal with increased demand. Further, it was noted that the government leadership believed students deserve to graduate with the skills and knowledge needed to gain employment; therefore, it planned to expand the number of college and university courses directly linked to jobs as it measured and published job placement results for graduates.

A careerist orientation is also evident in university recruitment materials. On the recruitment website of the university under study, for instance, number four of the top 10 reasons to attend the university is the advantage gained by the co-op and career centre. Through co-operative education and the career centre, students purportedly have an edge at starting their careers when they finish their degree. Potential students are also lured with the statement that 97.7% of our recent graduates have secured employment within six months after graduating and our employment rates of our graduates is among the highest in the province.

Corporatization of Postsecondary Education

The corporatization of postsecondary education has also been the focus of attention in recent years (Aronowitz, 2001; Chomsky, 2011; Clay, 2008; Steck, 2003). The adoption of corporate models of efficiency, ROI metrics, cost savings through the use of part-time and non-tenure track positions, and the increasing involvement of corporate-sponsored activities, endowments, and infrastructure projects has, in many cases, influenced the discourse within postsecondary institutions. Referring to students as clients is just one such example.

Poor economic times have also led to changes in the focus of Canadian universities. Canadian universities are, for the most part, public institutions funded by the government through the taxpayers. As taxes increase, incomes stagnate or decrease and the demands for social services increase, the public expects universities to provide tangible and immediate results with the funding they receive. Pursuing ideas for the sake of the idea itself, the traditional bastion of academic work, is not acceptable in a results-oriented environment in which university administration is expected to run their institution as a business. As universities are organizations, business strategies have been slowly introduced in an attempt to find greater financial and resource efficiencies. Slowly, the idea of the university as a business-like organization has been morphing towards the idea that a university is a business. More clearly, our universities are becoming corporations (Cote & Allahar, 2011).

Business, both as a field of undergraduate study and as a strategic orientation to post-secondary education, has influenced our understanding of post-secondary education (Blewitt, 2010; Fairclough, 1993). Parker (2007) suggests that post-secondary institutions are undergoing a “corporatisation of university structures and cultures, along with the commercialisation of their missions, objectives and strategies” (p. 2). In a parallel, if more micro way, managerialist discourses that focus on efficiency, effectiveness, goal attainment, and profitability serve to define the activities that are valued and rewarded at the individual and organizational levels (Mills & Simmons, 1999). At the university level “modern institutions of higher education have been caught in a tension between the ideals of a classical pedagogy, in which knowledge and learning are ends in themselves, and the demands of government and business for utilitarian relevance” (Cunliffe, Forray, & Knights, 2002, p. 490).

Method

It is against this contextual backdrop that the case study of the challenges and opportunities facing our undergraduate leadership program is analyzed. Our data included faculty reflections and discussions about the program, as well as recommendations included in the report prepared for the program’s provincially-mandated seven year review. All five faculty members of the leadership program authored a reflection of their experiences in developing, delivering, and sustaining the leadership program. Reflections ranged from 883 to 2369 words in length. The authors had extensive dialogue around the viability of the leadership program as it went through its review process and as its viability was being questioned extensively by senior administration. This dialogue, some digital-audio recorded and some recorded in notes, was also analyzed. The program review included a provincially mandated external assessment of the program conducted

at the seven year mark of the program. The external reviewers included senior faculty members of outside institutions. The external reviewers prepared a report based on a site visit and interviews with faculty in our department and senior university administrators, as well as an analysis of extensive written documentation regarding the philosophy, statistics, and curriculum information regarding the program.

Our analysis involved reading and re-reading the texts informally, as is common in qualitative research where the text itself is in a subsidiary or complementary role (Perakyla, 2005). We analyzed the text as a representation of the discourses in which we are embedded.

Analysis

Through analysis of the textual samples under review, four major themes emerged:

- Creating a space – mandates and roadblocks.
- Creating an identity – innovation and isomorphism.
- Creating traction – pedagogy and pragmatism.
- Creating a future – sustainability and uncertainty.

We consider each of these themes in turn as we show that all phases of the leadership program's development have been shaped by the power and influence of the previously identified contextual discourses.

The program under study is an undergraduate leadership program that has been running for eight years at the satellite campus of a comprehensive Canadian university. The satellite campus, which welcomed its first group of students in September 1999, was developed as an innovative liberal arts and interdisciplinary campus. It is located approximately 55 kilometers from the original campus, and the original campus recently celebrated its 100th anniversary as a university.

Creating a Space: Mandates and Roadblocks

Since the early 2000s there has been almost constant pressure on the satellite campus faculty, from all levels of the university administration, to develop new academic programs. In our particular case, the development of the leadership program was faced with both opportunities and challenges. A leadership program was deemed to be a good fit with the emerging mission of the university, *Inspiring Lives of Leadership and Purpose*, as well as the goals of the satellite campus. At the same time, however, any new academic programs had to be developed in such a way that existing programs at the original campus were not duplicated, nor perceived to be duplicated.

According to one faculty member's reflection, the new program's development was marked by several mandates:

From the beginning of this initiative, we were faced with several challenges: first, the program could not encroach on other existing [original campus] programs (including

the business program); then the program was to attract a large number of students in order to contribute to the growth of the [satellite] campus created only four years before (1999)... We also needed to position the program and to bring the administration on board.

According to another faculty member:

The desire for innovative programming was driven, in part, by an institutional understanding that programming at the satellite campus would not duplicate existing programming offered at the “main” campus. Protectionism and territorial stances were strongly asserted despite the fact that the main campus was well-established (it was approximately 90 years old at the time), geographically distinct from the satellite campus (approximately 55 kilometers away), and in a well-established, fairly affluent community marked by two universities and a burgeoning high tech community. In contrast, the satellite campus was started in a smaller city that was trying to emerge from economically depressed conditions that had plagued the city for more than two decades. These early years marked the beginning of an identity challenge for the program. What is it – an alternative to business or business-lite, or something else?

Evident is the complex mix of pedagogical, administrative, and financial factors that served as a backdrop to the development of the leadership program. One impetus for starting a leadership program had been to foster growth at the satellite campus by tapping in to the large numbers of students looking for a business education. University administration was firmly committed to rapidly growing the campus, and to do so were accepting, and thereby maintaining and promoting, the growing hegemony of undergraduate university education as a career credential.

The external context delivered its own set of challenges. Unlike the United States, leadership as an academic program at the undergraduate level is not well established in Canada. This is despite the fact that reports such as the 2004 Conference Board of Canada report clearly noted that leadership skills were in demand. Yet, our program was only the second undergraduate leadership program in Canada and the first in the province of Ontario. No new leadership undergraduate programs have been created in the intervening years.

In this context, we needed to design a program that fit the general trend of undergraduate leadership programs, tailored and marketable to Canadian high school students, and also fit the constraints imposed by our university. The leadership program development team (one of the authors was a member of the original team) upheld the vision, based on demonstrated research, that leadership programs should be multidisciplinary by nature, and that courses from different disciplines (e.g., sociology, psychology, organizational studies, business, communication, industrial studies) would be integral to its content. They believed in the importance of leadership education and hoped that, along with teaching practical skills, a liberal arts education component to the program would contribute to developing discerning citizens and leaders (Wren et al., 2009). Their main goal was to develop a program that would prepare students not only to understand the concept and practice of leadership, but also to understand the reality of different

types of organizations and develop their own leadership potential. This goal aligned with those identified in the leadership education literature, including “to provide opportunities for people to learn the skills, attitudes, and concepts necessary to become effective leaders” (Huber, 2002, p. 25) and to “prepare students to deal with the reality of a diverse world so they are able to handle constant change as they lead in the 21st century” (Watt, 2003, p. 13). Regardless of governmental policy direction or the common public perception of a liberal arts education, the vast majority of leadership theories support the importance of the relationship between the formal and informal study of a liberal arts curriculum and the growth of leadership skills (Muhlenfeld, 2009).

Many different models of leadership programs were explored. As a team responsible for designing and developing the program, we had to work from several questions similar to Hosford’s program development model (cited by Watt, 2003):

- What will be the goals of the program?
- Will the program be vocational, technical, professional, or liberal arts?
- Who will be the clientele, and how do we target it?
- How do we best integrate experiential learning into the program?
- Will the program be cost effective?

The most important question that interested the institution dealt with the cost effectiveness of the program.

Initially, the name Organizational Leadership was chosen for the program because it was a commonly used name by leadership programs in the United States. Also, a number of conceptual similarities existed between organizational theory and leadership studies. Of the programs listed on the website of the International Leadership Association (ILA), more than half are called Organizational Leadership, and in the study by Brungardt et al. (2006), 10 out of 15 degree programs were found to be named Organizational Leadership. Choosing an organizational leadership framework to develop the program was also supported by the fact that leadership and organizational change are intertwined (Watt, 2003). The isomorphism of the emerging program with extant leadership programs also provided grounds for credibility in the field of leadership education.

From its launch, the identity of the leadership program was aligned – and potentially overshadowed – in stakeholders’ minds with elements of business education. This was problematic. The need for distinctiveness was marked by imperatives (e.g., “could not encroach,” “would not duplicate,” “was not to open”). The term “encroach,” with its connotation of impinging on the rights of others, captures the strength of the situation facing the leadership program vis-a-vis the business program at the main campus. In the second excerpt we see even greater concerns over business education ownership with the strident terms “protectionism” and “territorialism.” The leadership program was driven to be innovative in its course offerings and programming, in part, by roadblocks of what it could not be. University education as a path to a job could not be seen at the satellite campus as a business program, and so administration hoped to recontextualize it as a leadership program. To do so, the leadership program needed to be

distinct enough from business that it did not threaten the original campus, yet similar enough to business that it attracted students looking for a business education. This, as will be seen in a later section of analysis, became somewhat problematic.

Creating an Identity: Innovation and Isomorphism

While the program was designed in accordance with leadership programs in the United States, there is no tradition of undergraduate leadership programs in Canada. Defining the program to senior high school students is challenging. During open houses, the parents of our prospective students find the program more relatable than their university-bound offspring. This increases the pressure on the full-time faculty of the program to find ways to redefine it, increase the enrollment, and keep it alive.

Two years after its introduction, the program was not able to reach the projected enrollment targets. The average number of applications to the program was around 20 students a year, far from the 50 or more projected by the administration. This raised new sets of questions:

- How can we make the program attractive to high school graduates who are more concerned with finding a job after their degree?
- How do we increase the applicant pool for a program that is not well established in Canada as a field of study?
- What is a reasonable size to run a viable undergraduate leadership program?

While being innovative provides opportunities for program development, it is not always easy to maintain, as noted in the following excerpt:

There is also a lack of awareness about leadership undergraduate degrees in general, and [our] Leadership program in particular. Since becoming a faculty member here, every single person who has asked me where I work has responded “Leadership? What’s a Leadership degree?” And, to be honest, I don’t have a good enough answer to that question. I usually respond that it’s like a management degree, but with a greater focus on leadership and less on business. Leadership is extremely popular right now in the media, in the academic literature, and in organizations – where “being a leader” is often a qualification for getting a job. We should be capitalizing on that popularity to attract good students to our program, but no one knows that we exist.

Given how relatively new the campus was when the leadership program was launched, together with how uncommon an undergraduate leadership degree was, and continues to be, in Canada, overcoming the hurdle of awareness was a significant issue and it presented real challenges to meeting one of the original points of the mandate – program growth. The use of the extreme case formulation “every single person who has asked me...has responded ‘Leadership? What is a leadership degree?’” emphasizes the lack of familiarity with this type of degree. Discursively positioning the leadership program with the simile of “it’s like a management degree” demonstrates the power of the term “management degree” as a recognizable degree, but also

reinforces the role of business education as a legitimizing term and a hegemonic discourse. Interestingly, when we, as leadership program faculty, compare the leadership degree to a business degree to gain legitimacy, we reinforce the hegemonic nature of the business discourse.

While students, employers, and organizations may not be familiar with what a leadership degree is, there is broad familiarity with degrees in business and commerce. As a result, response to failed innovation becomes isomorphic. In attempts to gain recognition and increase enrollment numbers, the leadership program has begun more closely aligning itself with a business degree, and moving away from its liberal arts foundation. Faculty members felt the pressure of trying to run an undergraduate program amidst the struggle of two competing discourses. We understood and supported the campus-wide focus on a liberal arts education, and yet at the same time we also, as well as administration, wanted to see our program grow, and we would have liked to see our graduates move on to interesting and engaging careers. The much more powerful, hegemonic discourse of university education as job training has merits that we acknowledge, and we struggle amongst ourselves as to our own orientation toward undergraduate education – careerist or liberal arts.

Creating Traction: Pedagogy and Pragmatism

Decisions about pedagogy for some elements of the leadership programming were influenced and shaped by pragmatic concerns for student employment after graduation:

Are we here to provide students with a foundational education based mainly in theory and critical thinking, or are we here to prepare them for a job? It seems that students and their parents are mainly focused on a university education as a path to a good-paying job when the degree is completed, and that what is learned during the degree is of little value unless it can be put on a resume. If that's the case, then a Leadership degree would appear to be of little value to undergraduate students, as they will not be moving from university directly into a formal, paid leadership position. What tangible job skills does our program provide?

Similarly, another faculty member noted that:

We are therefore at a point where we are thinking about injecting some 'legitimacy' into the program by adding in more recognizable business courses. We feel that this may not only attract more quality students but also help our students secure jobs in the marketplace.

Concerns for post-degree employment held by many external stakeholders (e.g., parents and students) create uncertainty regarding the program's viability. The careerism orientation establishes a tension between a leadership program with a liberal arts orientation and one with a business orientation. "Legitimacy" is tied to the presence of business education. By default, then, non-business education is in the category of "non-legitimate" programming. Pedagogy also includes concerns regarding the approach to managing the program. Should it be a large program

or a boutique program? As noted in the following excerpt, these discussions are driven by growth models:

Ideally, we would like to have run this program as an elite boutique program. However, attracting top students has been a challenge and we have also had to deal with pressures from administration to grow the program.

It was becoming clear that the corporatization of post-secondary institutions was driving pedagogy.

Beyond faculty comments regarding pedagogy, faculty also report on student comments regarding business education in the leadership program:

The Leadership program also struggles with the fact that many of its students in fact wanted to earn a business undergrad degree but didn't have the grades to be accepted.... Students regularly identified one of the weaknesses of the leadership program as not having enough business content.

In addition, faculty members commented on pedagogy and student employability post graduation. Their comments are included in the following two excerpts:

Social work students graduate and become social workers, or at least that is the direction their academic education is designed to take them in. Education students graduate and become teachers and business students graduate to work in the business world. The latter group would presumably look for jobs in their area of specialty (i.e., accounting, marketing, economics, etc.) in a similar way that the education students stream towards the primary/junior or junior/intermediate divisions. On the other hand, Leadership students graduate and become 'leaders'?

Graduates from a Leadership program, would presumably be ready to take on Leadership roles and continue to develop their Leadership skills and capacities. The problem however, is two-fold. First, few students will graduate and immediately be hired into traditional leadership positions. Second, while social work, teaching, accounting etc. are defined areas with defined job prospects, Leadership is a philosophy, an orientation or at the very least, a quality that isn't just limited to a defined area. After all, look in the job ads and there just doesn't seem to be a category for "Leadership."

Several initiatives were then taken to address the recruitment issue in an attempt to keep the program alive. In 2006/2007, the program name was changed from Organizational Leadership to Leadership. The leadership program also developed an articulation agreement with a Human Resources Management program at a local community college. Designed to give the students additional market-recognized credentials, the articulation agreement in effect further aligned the leadership program with business-related credentialing and reinforces the themes of careerism and the hegemony of business and business-related education.

The change of name did not help increase the numbers, and later on we realized that the first cohort of students graduating with the name Leadership (rather than Organizational Leadership) did not like the new name as it was not “businessy” enough, to use the word of a student. These complaints from the students were the first realization for faculty that many leadership students enrolled in the program because the university’s recontextualisation of the leadership degree as a “kind of business degree” had worked to a certain extent. The leadership program did not require high school math for entrance, nor did it require any courses in economics, finance, or accounting. The extreme importance of math to a business degree notwithstanding, these students perceived that the word organizational in the program name gave it legitimacy as a business degree. Indeed, amongst some students and faculty, the program was commonly referred to as “business without the math.” With the removal of “organizational” from the name, students worried that their degree would be associated with leadership degrees in the recreation and leisure studies discipline, not business. Even though faculty in the leadership program were working to provide a quality liberal arts degree, students were coming to the program, and agitating for, as close to a business degree as they could get.

The addition of business programming availability to leadership (and other) students through an Administration Option highlights the perceived power s of business education as a route to employment. The Administration Option included a range of business courses, all of which were offered through the business school. This meant that all course-related material (e.g., outlines, textbooks, faculty appointments) were under the control of the business school. As a result, elements of the curriculum available to students were now becoming isomorphic with business education. While the strategy of injecting business programming was driven by pragmatic implications, it speaks to the power of business education in shaping perceptions. The alignment of the term “legitimacy” with “business” programming implies that the non-business programming is “illegitimate.”

Creating a Future: Sustainability and Uncertainty

Seven years after its inauguration, the leadership program was still hounded by questions of sustainability and viability, questions of careerism, and questions pertaining to leadership’s relationship to business education. That is:

The issue of sustainability in relation to the number of students, the skills transferred through these undergraduate programs so students can play a leadership role, is a key dimension to leadership education research these days. One of the questions that interest us here is, whether a student graduating from an undergraduate leadership program will acquire enough skills to be functional and work ready within an organization?

As previously mentioned, the program recently went through a mandatory full program review. The first two recommendations of the review committee pointed to the steadily increasing ties between business and leadership education. One recommendation suggested that the program become “Management and Leadership.” The other recommendation pointed to the introduction

of a Management Option. From a careerist lens, the reviewers also noted that the program should promote the “types of jobs, careers, and postgraduate studies it can lead to.” Other comments from the reviewers helped explore new ways to make the program more appealing to high school students while at the same time reinforcing many of the contextual discourses surrounding the program. New sets of questions were raised among both faculty and administration:

Do we forge an alliance with the incoming business program and what would that alliance look like? Where do we see our program in the next five years? Will it be a stream or concentration in the business program? Will it be a Masters level program? Will it be an option? Will it cease to exist? We also have to deal with the enrollment issue? How can we market the program which could be characterized as “elite” as opposed to a catchall program? Do we just lower the entrance average and let more students in even if they don’t necessarily want to be here? I think that in order to address any of these questions we first need to better understand who WE want to be.

The 2010/2011 academic year was particularly tumultuous for the leadership program. Numerous discussions were held as to the immediate viability of the program. Proposals were developed for major changes to the program in the hope of attracting a greater number of students. University administration began the process of convincing the business school housed at the original campus to agree to offer its programming at the satellite campus as well. What seemed to be the imminent termination of the program was abruptly stopped as the 2011/2012 enrollment numbers reflected an increase of over 300% compared to the previous year due to the administration’s decision to lower the entrance average of the leadership program and provide alternative offers to students who were not accepted into their program of choice.

Conclusions and Implications

Greenwald (2010) has noted that as leadership programs were first developed and introduced some 20 years ago they were considered at best marginal to the mission and often situated in centers led by charismatic personalities trying to carve out an academic home that legitimized the “new” discipline of leadership and some were not taken seriously by the academic community while fading from view. This paper attempts to identify those specific institutional factors that have shaped, and continue to shape, the life of our leadership program.

In line with Dilley’s (1999) caution against treating context as the ultimate explanatory factor, we suggest that the institutional factors identified seem to explain much of how our leadership program developed, although many other factors come in to play as well. We note that the identified contextual factors may form a part of the institutional context of other, similar programs, and may indeed offer some understanding of those forces that are apt to result in isomorphism (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Scott, 1995) of leadership programs in general. Importantly, such isomorphism in leadership programs may become problematic when institutional factors start to block the creation of much needed change (Nirenberg, 2003).

The development of our leadership program was, and is still, clearly confronted with the larger discourse surrounding the role of universities, academic programs, liberal arts education, and

business education. Universities today are preoccupied with cost effectiveness and the desire to grow the intake of students. Under this pressure of increasing the number of students, we are exploring a better integration of the leadership program with management to respond to the work-readiness that university programs are under pressure to deliver. The market or job-driven education model that characterizes our system forces us to be proactive if we do not want to wholly succumb to the dominant discourse. As leadership educators in Canada, our role is to steer the discipline forward and to work on a long-term strategy for establishing the field of leadership studies. This role is, in part, driven by a strong belief in the wide ranging benefits of undergraduate leadership education. Research suggests that the early introduction of leadership education to first year undergrads has the potential to have a positive impact on leadership behaviours of students in their senior years of study (Posner, 2009) and potentially long-term influences on individual, organizational and community engagement and awareness (Black, Metzler, & Waldrum, 2006). Other researchers suggest that leadership programs establish the capacity for a “leadership culture in society” (Ayman, Adams, Fischer, & Hartman, 2003, p. 220). The demise of undergraduate leadership programs could have a notable detrimental effect on the development of leadership capacity in organizations and communities.

Identifying a strategy to realize the vision of a strong undergraduate leadership program is less clear-cut. Our original vision of the leadership program as an interdisciplinary, liberal arts degree still has proponents within our leadership faculty and is in line with the perspective of some researchers exploring leadership development models (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003). Our recent work to develop a degree that combines both the liberal arts and the business disciplines has not succeeded. We, as faculty members, however, are not immune to the conflicting discourses in which we find ourselves. As we make the decision in the coming months to either remain a liberal arts degree, or to align ourselves with the university’s business faculty, we are aware of the role we play in the struggle between the orientations of university education as liberal arts education versus vocational training. If we choose to align our program with the business school, we perpetuate and strengthen the hegemonic discourse, while also better situating our students for careers. If we choose to remain as a liberal arts degree, we join the resistant discourse, and risk our program being cut for lack of numbers. If the program is cut, the hegemonic discourse will have perpetuated and strengthened itself in spite of us. There is no easy answer, and both individually and as a faculty we continue to struggle with what is the best way forward for our leadership program, in terms of ourselves, our students, our university, and the greater discourse of university education. Overarching our views is the staunch belief that as Greenwald (2010) recently noted today students need leadership more than ever before.

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