

Commentary from an Agricultural Educator

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Vision . . . Focus . . . Change . . . Influence! These terms are commonly used in the language of leaders and leadership education. In the context of the *National Leadership Education Research Agenda (NLERA)* (Andenoro, et al., 2013) those terms reflect higher-level meanings and applications. First and foremost, the overarching **vision** of a ‘living’ document to guide and direct future leadership education research has far-reaching implications for faculty, students, and ultimately the knowledge base of leadership education. Scholars of leadership education should be motivated and challenged by the NLERA to identify how their individual and collective contributions expand the knowledge base of our discipline. Having foresight and recognizing what leadership education aspires to be and become in the future was prerequisite to the development of the NLERA. The ability to envision a preferred future through a new and different lens is the very essence of a vision. Based upon that vision, we now have a framework and pathway to build upon our existing knowledge by adding new knowledge that, by consensus, is both important and significant (Warmbrod, 1986; 1987, 1993).

As leadership educators and researchers, we need to express our gratitude and appreciation to our professional colleagues, who devoted considerable time and effort to collect, summarize, organize, and interpret data and information from multiple sources that resulted in the NLERA document that was released at the Association of Leadership Educators (ALE) conference in New Orleans in June, 2013. The introduction section of the document itself (accessible at: <http://www.leadershipeducators.org/ResearchAgenda>) provides a brief description of the rationale and need for a research agenda and will not be repeated in this commentary. However, readers are encouraged to review that section of the document to gain a more complete understanding of the basis upon which the NLERA was developed.

Suffice it to say that the NLERA fills a void that has existed since the birth of leadership education with regard to the focus and direction of leadership education research. For the first time, we have a document that provides a degree of consensus with regard to the collective perspectives of our professional colleagues regarding priority leadership education topics that should be addressed through our research programs in the future. Faculty and students who use the NLERA as a framework and guide for their leadership education research programs and activities will provide more coherent and substantive additions to the knowledge base of our discipline.

Focus

Structurally, the NLERA is organized into seven Research Priority Areas, two under the category of Pedagogy and five under the category of Content-Based Considerations. Descriptions included under each priority include sections on Applied Outcomes, Background/Foundations, Challenges, and Opportunities. Figure 1 (below) presents a brief overview of the seven research priority areas with important topics highlighted in each area. Summarizing the contents of the NLERA in such a way provides a clear focus to the research topics that have been identified as priorities for leadership education researchers over the next five years. Although five years is not a magic number, it provides another dimension of importance and focus, by establishing timeline parameters for the established priorities. Such a focus is important for the current time frame, but there is also a need to re-examine research priorities frequently. The scope of five years provides sufficient time to make progress on research agenda priorities, but also establishes an expectation that priorities will need to be reviewed on a regular basis.

National Leadership Education Research Agenda (2013-2018)	
Pedagogical Priorities – The Applied How of Leadership Education	
Priority #1	Teaching, Learning, and Curriculum Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop Transdisciplinary Perspectives for Leadership Education • Explore the Capacity & Competency Development Process for the Leadership Education Learner • Explore the Role of the Individual Learner in Leadership Education • Explore the Role of the Individual Learner in Leadership Education
Priority #2	Programmatic Assessment and Evaluation <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase Understanding of Leadership Program Differences • Establish Collaborative Capacity for Programmatic Assessment • Explore Shared Standards for Leadership Programs • Assess Viable Programmatic Assessment Resources
Content-Based Priorities – The Applied What and Who of Leadership Education	
Priority #3	The Psychological Development of Leaders, Followers, and Learners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of Leader, Follower, and Learner Psychological Capacity • Development of Moral and Ethical Foundations for Leadership Practice • Development of Critical and Creative Thinking Disposition and the Accompanying Self-Efficacy to Demonstrate Action
Priority #4	The Sociological Development of Leaders, Followers, and Learners <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of Learning Organizations • Developing the Leader, Follower, and Learner with Respect to Addressing Complex Adaptive Systems
Priority #5	Influences of Social Identity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examining Social Identity in Leadership Content • Examining Social Identity in Leadership Pedagogy

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examining Social Identity in Leadership Research
Priority #6	Social Change and Community Development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Examine Innovative Implications for and Application of Social Change Leadership • Contextualization of Self & The Other • Development of Vibrant & Resilient Communities
Priority #7	Global and Intercultural Leadership <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of the Intercultural Learner, Leader, and Follower • Development of Global Organizations • Development of the Intercultural Leadership Educator

Change

Historically, the driving force behind faculty and graduate student decisions to address particular research topics has been their own personal interests. Although individual scholarly interests will continue to be important, the NLERA will likely shift leadership education research programs and activities toward the priorities outlined in the document. Faculty members engaged in research will likely review the NLERA priorities to assess the extent to which their current research program aligns with the seven priority areas. As faculty plan future research programs, they themselves (or through the encouragement of their department chair) will likely reflect on the NLERA priorities as they consider the future direction and scope of their research.

Graduate students are also likely to use the framework of the NLERA to assess their potential interests in the priorities identified above. Many graduate students are expected to plan their own thesis or dissertation research projects in order to address one or more of the NLERA priorities; which carry an implicit assumption regarding the importance and significance of the research topic, based on its alignment with NLERA priorities. In addition, doctoral graduates who aspire to faculty positions in higher education are likely to focus on research topics that align with NLERA priorities in order to demonstrate how their research aligns with established priorities and contributes to the knowledge base of the discipline. Coincidentally, master's students whose thesis projects align with established research priorities may be more attractive candidates for doctoral admission to programs in which faculty are working on similar leadership education research priorities. Each of these potential implications are ripple effects created as a result of the identification and communication of research priorities for leadership educators. Although these changes may or may not have been anticipated . . . it is clear that leadership education research will be forever changed as a result.

Influence

“Leadership is influence. That’s it. Nothing more. Nothing less.” (Maxwell, 1993, p. 1)

Although these words were written twenty years ago, they still ring true today. The essence of leadership is influence. Although we cannot predict with certainty what influence the NLERA will have on leadership education, I think it is safe to say that the effect will be profound on many levels.

At the most basic level, the research priorities included in the NLERA will have a direct effect on untold numbers of faculty and graduate students as they plan their research programs and activities over the next several years. The impact of this outcome will reverberate throughout our discipline as waves of students progress through our graduate programs, and faculty define and refocus their research programs periodically.

Although the initial effect of NLERA will be internal to the discipline of leadership education, we might also experience a much broader impact well beyond the boundaries of leadership education. Communicating research priorities to other disciplines will potentially open doors for interdisciplinary research that is critically important to address the complexity of problems and issues that we face in our world today. Using the NLERA as a tool to effectively communicate priority research topics may be a good tool to initiate conversations and ultimately develop relationships with scholars from other disciplines to collaborate on research projects that require expertise from our respective disciplines. The potential to engage in multidisciplinary research is tremendous, but we sometimes need a ‘conversation starter’ to initiate the dialogue with potential future colleagues. The NLERA may be just the tool to start that conversation.

At a higher level, the NLERA may also be useful as a communication tool with funding agencies as they draft language (especially funding priorities) in their request for applications. Providing copies of the NLERA (or more appropriately a two-page briefing summary) to funding agency personnel (followed up by a personal contact) will potentially facilitate the infusion of language that reflects leadership education research priorities. We should learn from the experiences of our colleagues in agricultural education when the second iteration of the National Agricultural Education Research Agenda (Doerfert, 2011) was crafted to more specifically influence the language that would ultimately be used in USDA funding programs. Although this may appear to be somewhat self-serving, we need to be cognizant of the need to provide funding support for our research in higher education. The more we can use the NLERA to serve multiple purposes, the better.

Summary

Without question enormous effort has been expended on behalf of the NLERA authors (and untold numbers of colleagues) who contributed to the publication of research that can be used to guide and communicate disciplinary research priorities over the next few years. The potential impact of the document is mind-boggling; however, nothing happens by itself. The initial work

of drafting the document has been completed . . . but now the real work of implementation is incumbent upon each of us in the discipline to embrace the document and use it to its maximum potential.

Faculty members should identify how their work aligns with the existing priorities and make necessary modifications as they deem appropriate. Faculty should also share a brief summary of the document with local administrators (e.g. department chairs, deans, and research leaders) to inform them of the priorities and how those priorities might affect your research program.

Graduate students should review the NLERA document and begin the process of defining their own research project(s) and program in the context of the consensus priorities. Although we may encourage students to develop a research program based on their personal and professional interests, it would be wise for students to do so in the context of disciplinary research priorities.

Finally, our colleagues who serve as leaders within our discipline, should strategically identify opportunities to communicate the NLERA priorities to other disciplinary leaders and funding personnel to increase their awareness. Initiating conversations and influencing research funding program language are strategic initiatives that will pay unanticipated dividends for leadership educators and leadership education research for years to come.

Agricultural leadership educators are expected to address the NLERA priorities, but within the context of food, agriculture, and the environment. Although we recognize a common core of leadership theories, principles, concepts, and skills, leadership does not occur in the absence of a context. Therefore, faculty and graduate students who engage in agricultural leadership research will contribute to the knowledge base of leadership in the context of personal leadership development with a heavy emphasis on adolescent and youth development. In addition, young adult and adult leadership development will frame the population for faculty and graduate students interested in career preparation and/or development in the food, agricultural, and environmental sciences. Organizational leadership and policy development offers yet a third contextual lens for agricultural leadership researchers that may differ somewhat from other disciplinary contexts. Regardless of the specific leadership priority of interest, agricultural leadership research has much to gain and much to offer by focusing on the research priorities outlined in the NLERA.

References

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Author Biography

Robert J. Birkenholz is a Professor in the Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership (ACEL) at The Ohio State University. Dr. Birkenholz earned his B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. degrees in Agricultural Education from Iowa State University in 1976, 1978, and 1982, respectively. He currently teaches and advises undergraduate and graduate students, and serves as the Coordinating Advisor of the undergraduate, interdisciplinary minor in Leadership Studies. He was Chair of the Department of Human and Community Resource Development at OSU from 2002-2009.

He has taught a variety of courses in Agricultural Education and Leadership at the undergraduate and graduate levels. He has advised 59 Master's and 23 doctoral degree graduates. Birkenholz served as President of the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) and was inducted as an AAAE Fellow in 1998. He received the AAAE North Central Region Outstanding Agricultural Educator award in 2011. He has presented lectures on the topics of student-centered learning and leading change at four state agricultural universities in India. In 2008 he was inducted as a Fellow in the Kellogg Food Systems Leadership Institute (FSLI). In May 2012 he presented the Distinguished Lecture titled *Ripple Effects* at the AAAE national conference in Asheville, NC.