

**Engaging the Whole Student:
Student Affairs and the National Leadership Education Research Agenda**

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Abstract

Student affairs educators have an important role in advancing the National Leadership Education Research Agenda (NLERA). This article reviews the ‘cross fertilization’ of student affairs and leadership education by examining strengths, opportunities, and challenges in relation to the NLERA priorities. Student affairs educators’ commitment to the integration of theory and practice, to the intentional and developmental design and assessment of learning environments, and to applying critical and constructivist perspectives to the ethical and emancipatory foundations of leadership education are all explored. Recommendations for future research are identified, including a call for research that includes complex modeling and multivariate analyses, and research that examines the contributions of cognitive, affective, and efficacy-related dimensions of leadership.

Introduction

It has been over 100 years since the first Dean of Students appeared on a college campus in the United States. Since that time, the notion of college personnel who support and serve students has evolved to the rich and complex field of student affairs. The study and practice of student affairs has developed “to encompass a broad theoretical base, extended graduate level preparation, a strong commitment to service rather than to personal gain, and a community of practitioners with high standards for ethical practice and conduct” (Komives, Woodard, & Associates, 2003, p. xv). Indeed, the evolution of student affairs as a profession is intertwined with evolving concepts of leadership and leadership development. At the core of the *Student*

Personnel Point of View, one of the foundational documents in student affairs, is a belief in the development of the whole student, including cognitive and affective components, and that all students learn both in and outside the classroom (American Council on Education, 1937, 1949). There is meaningful overlap between student affairs' focus on student learning and development and the cultivation of leadership in college students, such that leadership scholar Denny Roberts (2007) declares, "I propose that deeper learning and deeper leadership are closely aligned, if not one and the same" (p. 17).

Student Affairs and Leadership Education

As leadership is increasingly recognized as an essential outcome of higher education, there is a reciprocal influence between student affairs and leadership education. In the *Handbook for Student Leadership Development*, Susan Komives (2011) offers a detailed chronicle of the influences of student affairs and higher education on leadership education and development. She illustrates four examples of the "cross fertilization" of student affairs and leadership education (p.3). First, professionals trained in student development and identity formation are invested in advancing the leadership capacity of diverse college students. Second, the emergence of a burgeoning number of national associations and clearinghouses in student affairs that are dedicated wholly or in part to the work of student leadership training, education, and development (such as ACPA, ACHUO-I, ACUI, NACA, NCLP, NASPA). These groups collaborated with other disciplinary and academic associations such as the Association for Leadership Education (ALE), the International Leadership Association (ILA), and the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL), as well as with publishing outlets such as Jossey-Bass, to advance leadership education and development.

Third, these associations and members led to the establishment of standards of practice for student leadership education and development such as the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education's *Standards for Student Leadership Programs* (2009) and ILA's *Guiding Questions for Leadership Education* (Ritch & Association, 2009), as well as to the development of theories and models of leadership relevant to college populations. Finally, increased assessment and scholarly research on student leadership learning and development (such as the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, the Emotionally Intelligent Leadership Inventory, the Wabash study, etc.) reflects and contributes to the growing complexity and depth of leadership education.

Student affairs educators demonstrate numerous competencies essential for leadership education. Judy Rogers (2003) enumerates the ways those engaging in student affairs work make unique contributions to the field of leadership studies. She describes competent student affairs leadership educators as being: Engaged in on-going self-development, able to build authentic relationships with diverse others, capable of structuring collaborative learning environments, willing to share power and to engage in creative conflict conducted with civility, skilled at

forging shared purposes and asking critical questions, and capable of developing a systemic view.

These capacities are essential to fully engage in the National Leadership Education Research Agenda (NLERA). The context for this agenda is ‘building human capacity.’ Student affairs educators are experts at designing intentional environments that facilitate growth and positive change in students. The agenda is ‘inclusive of both curricular and co-curricular educational efforts.’ Student affairs educators are skilled at the integration of curricular and co-curricular experiences, and value all aspects of students’ lives. Priority One in the NLERA is teaching, learning, and curriculum development. Student affairs educators are skilled at theoretical integration and Freire’s (1970) notion of *praxis*, or action and reflection upon the world in order to promote positive change. Student affairs educators are leaders in personal and programmatic assessment and evaluation, and thus enact NLERA Priority Two. Priorities Three and Four are the psychological and sociological development of leaders, followers, and learners; student affairs educators are experts in assessing developmental readiness, enhancing self-efficacy and self-authorship, and integrating cognitive, psychosocial, and cultural dimensions of development. Per Priority Five, student affairs educators are understanding of diverse social identities and have a deep understanding of diversity and individual differences, as well as commonalities. Student affairs shines when it comes to Priority Six, promoting social change and community development. Student affairs educators never cease to ask critical questions and continually examine the ethical, democratic, and emancipatory foundations of leadership education. Finally, student affairs is now an international enterprise and increasing numbers of post-secondary institutions around the world are committed to enhancing the well-being of students, including addressing Priority Seven, global and intercultural leadership.

These strengths and competencies are essential for facilitating student leadership education and development. They demonstrate the important role that student affairs educators have in advancing the NLERA. In recognizing these great strengths, it is important to note challenges facing student affairs educators as they approach leadership education. These challenges are addressed in the next section.

Leadership Education Challenges

The scope of leadership education and development within student affairs and higher education has evolved substantially in the past 30 years into a “field with established theoretical frames, conceptual models, standards of practice, and diverse pedagogical strategies” (Komives, 2011, p. 2). Leadership education within student affairs has made great strides, and in order to continue to move the field forward some key challenges and issues should be considered.

To understand these challenges and issues it is important to first examine the larger context of higher education and student affairs. Higher education institutions and student affairs divisions exist in various forms and with various missions and purposes. Some universities, such

as Florida State University and Elon University, emphasize leadership development as a central outcome of the institution and have sophisticated, cross-institutional leadership education initiatives. Other institutions have well-developed departments within academic or student affairs departments that focus heavily on leadership education and development, and some institutions may not include a focus on leadership education (Komives, 2011). Higher education institutions and student affairs divisions have various goals, departments, and programs, of which leadership education is often one of many institutional priorities. This, along with the wide range of institutional types, missions, and priorities, results in a diverse array of leadership education programs across different campuses. With this context in mind, we identify five challenges facing leadership education within student affairs and higher education.

The first challenge is that there is not one traditional profile of the leadership educator within student affairs and higher education. Leadership education spans co-curricular and curricular contexts, is housed within and across academic and student affairs departments, exists to serve specified student leader populations as well as the broader student body, and reflects a range of outcomes based on institutional context, student populations, and theoretical underpinnings (Haber, 2011). Some leadership educators are leadership education *specialists*, working with well developed and well resourced leadership programs, while others are student affairs *generalists*, working with a wide range of job responsibilities, of which leadership programs is just one small part. In some cases, student affairs professionals from various functional areas across campus are tapped to be involved with leadership programs as instructors of leadership courses, leadership advisors or coaches, retreat facilitators, or workshop presenters. Thus, leadership educators reflect a wide range of experiences, backgrounds, and leadership knowledge. This leads to differing professional identities, a broad range of professional development needs, and various levels of leadership education competencies.

Related to this challenge of the wide range of leadership educators within student affairs and higher education is the second challenge- a dearth of formal leadership education training provided in graduate preparation programs. Because student leadership programs is just one functional area under the larger student affairs umbrella, it is not commonplace for student affairs graduate programs to include substantial curriculum on college student leadership education and development. Some graduate programs include leadership education and development to varying extents within core curriculum, other programs offer elective courses on student leadership, and others may not offer any curriculum at all on the topic. Some students may receive on-the-job training through graduate assistantship or internships, but few opportunities such as these exist. As such, many student affairs professionals enter student affairs and take on student leadership education responsibilities with little theoretical grounding in leadership and without training or education on teaching, learning, and curriculum development (Priority One). They must, then, seek out professional development and/or learn through trial and error. This poses a significant challenge for leadership educators and for the sustainability of leadership programs on campuses. Susan Komives (2011) emphasizes this challenge, stating,

“too many leadership programs exist because of the interest of a single professional who builds a program that fails to become institutionalized and closes when that professional leaves for another position” (p. 12).

Recognizing the challenges that can come with limited availability of leadership education training, a group of leadership educators recently joined together to address this need by planning a Leadership Education Academy (LEA) designed for those with little to no prior training or background in leadership education. LEA provides professional development on the topics of leadership theory and development, curriculum design, learning outcomes and assessment, and instructional strategies within the contexts of co-curricular and curricular leadership programs. This program will complement existing professional leadership development opportunities such as the Leadership Educators Institute (LEI) and the National Leadership Symposium (NLS). These professional development opportunities are a proactive way to address the training and education needs of leadership educators within student affairs and higher education contexts.

These educational activities relate to the third challenge facing leadership education within student affairs and higher education – adopting an educator mindset. This challenge exists within the larger student affairs context, emphasizing the need to recognize student affairs practitioners as educators who contribute to the larger institutional purpose of student learning. The recent movement within student affairs toward student learning places learning at the forefront of student affairs work (Reason & Broido, 2011), moving past the false boundaries and dichotomies that have been in place within higher education contexts and that have influenced the work of student affairs professionals:

Learning has its roots in the discipline of psychology and applied educational context and is often viewed as the responsibility of faculty, whereas student development has its roots in the field of higher education and student affairs and is often seen as the responsibility of student affairs staff. (King & Baxter Magolda, 2011, p. 207)

Similarly, student affairs practitioners may “continue to view themselves primarily as programmers, as providers of services and activities” (Owen, 2011a, p. 110), rather than as educators. Shifting our mindset from *programming* or *providing services* to *educating* helps frame a larger purpose of our work as leadership educators and helps legitimize our work in playing an important educative role within higher education. The Agenda and its many priorities emphasize the educative role of student affairs educators working with leadership programs, and it is important that leadership educators and other student affairs professional adopt this mentality.

A fourth challenge inherent in leadership education within student affairs is the strong administrative nature of these leadership educator positions. Unlike many faculty lines, leadership educators working in student affairs do not have research responsibilities-- or the time

that goes along with these responsibilities. Further, many lack researching tools, resources, and expertise. Accordingly, student leadership programs, although often well assessed, are under-researched. Further investigation of “how leadership interventions are designed and delivered” (Dugan, Bohle, Gebhardt, Hofert, Wilk, & Cooney, 2011) and the impact of these interventions on student leadership learning and development is warranted.

The final challenge we identified is the importance of intentionality in our work as leadership educators. In recent years the focus on accountability within higher education and student affairs has dramatically increased. With this increased focus on accountability comes the need to engage in reflective and deliberative practice (Harper, 2011). Harper (2011) discusses the importance of this within the context of student affairs work and advocates for formalizing the co-curriculum, whereby student affairs educators should

approach their work with intentionality to collaborate with others to enhance student learning.... [through] the implementation of a curricular model that is constructed around a set of desired educational outcomes, that identifies the programs and experiences necessary for the actualization of these outcomes, that strategically sequences them and assigns responsibility for implementation to expert educators in the division, and that lays out a multifaceted set of assessment activities to measure student learning and development. (p. 291)

This relates directly to the educator mindset discussed above. There are many deliberately intentional leadership programs, in co-curricular and curricular contexts, reflective of Harper’s curricular model. There are also leadership programs that lack purposeful frameworks, educational outcomes, and theoretical grounding.

There exists a wide range of quality and intentionality in assessing leadership programs and outcomes. Assessment within leadership education is multi-faceted and encompasses assessing leadership behaviors; learning outcomes; traits and styles; student needs and satisfaction; and attendance and participation (Owen, 2011b). All too often assessment within student affairs and within leadership education is limited to the assessment of satisfaction, needs, and attendance – this can be important information to have, but does not tell the whole story. Many programs conduct intentional and thorough assessments of leadership education initiatives that are theoretically grounded, well developed, precise, and purposeful. More efforts like the latter are needed to continue to legitimize and justify the impact of student affairs work, and more importantly, to ensure students are receiving the best education possible.

Leadership Education Opportunities

The Agenda provides a number of opportunities for advancing leadership education within student affairs and higher education. In this section we discuss Priorities One and Two, which address some of the challenges identified above. Further, we discuss Priorities Four and Seven as additional opportunities for advancing leadership education within student affairs.

Agenda Priorities One and Two reflect pedagogical priorities within leadership education, emphasizing the applied *how* of leadership education. A theme within the challenges identified above is a need to define student affairs work, and specifically work in leadership education and development, as encompassing a strong focus on student learning. Priority One, which focuses on teaching, learning, and curriculum development, stresses the role of the leadership learner and the processes in which leadership is learned and developed. The priority also emphasizes a need for leadership educators to use more innovative pedagogical models within leadership education, which warrants additional attention in both practice and in research within the context of leadership education in student affairs. Within the field there has been an increased emphasis on facilitating student learning through a wide range of pedagogical approaches that engage the learner and are conducive to a range of cognitive learning styles (Owen, 2011a), yet there is a need to further research the effectiveness of these approaches and their affect on student learning.

Priority Two, which emphasizes programmatic assessment and evaluation, speaks to the challenges of accountability and need for intentional and deliberative practice and assessment of our leadership education efforts outlined above. Although much progress has been made around assessment and evaluation of leadership programs over the past 10 years, the focus on accountability within higher education will continue to increase. Through the development of effective assessment tools that assess programmatic efforts and document student learning, the quality of leadership education can only continue to improve as well as be supported on college campuses. Further research in this area is warranted so as to inform continued assessment practices of student leadership programs.

Together Priorities One and Two also provide great opportunity for the purposeful development of resources available for the education, training, and ongoing professional development of leadership educators, another challenge noted above. Increased empirical research on teaching, learning, curriculum development, and assessment practices can greatly serve the development of current and future leadership educators, providing a more structured and empirically grounded approach than the fragmented and incomplete approaches to leadership educator development available today.

In addition to addressing the challenges outlined above, the Agenda also provides opportunity for advancement of the field in many different ways. This manuscript focused on Priority Four, the sociological development of leaders, followers, and learners, and Priority Seven, global and intercultural leadership.

Priority Four focuses on developing leadership within the group, team, and organizational contexts. It addresses the necessity of developing learning organizations and fostering leadership in complex, adaptive systems. Student affairs educators have much to contribute on this front. Many student affairs educators have taken courses related to group dynamics, group roles, and group counseling. Fewer have had course work related to organizational development, systemic

change, and social movements. Student personnel may regularly interact with students as part of clubs and organizations, teams, governing bodies, and hall councils, yet rarely intervene on more global institutional governance or policy issues. Student affairs educators are uniquely suited to developing team and group-level skills in students, yet a deliberate focus on organizational and systems-level change is rarely part of professional practice.

If student affairs educators were to rethink their existing organizations from a learning lens, positive changes could result. Schein (2004) denotes the essential elements necessary to foster learning organizations: an assumption of proactivity, commitment to learning to learn, positive assumptions about human nature, assuming that environments can be intentionally developed, a commitment to truth through pragmatism and inquiry, an orientation toward the future, commitment to full and open task relevant communication, commitment to diversity, systemic thinking, and the development of cultural analysis. Most student affairs educators are committed to individual learning and development. A move toward developing learning organizations and systems would include embracing the competencies enumerated above. Educators could shift from reactive and technical approaches to problems to creating flexible and adaptive structures that are responsive to shifting contexts. Rather than working tirelessly to alleviate symptoms of problems, student affairs educators could intervene at the organizational or systems level to identify and address root causes of perpetual issues.

There is great overlap between the professional competencies of student affairs educators and the practices the NLERA states are necessary to promote “the potential for creative contexts, innovative practice, and holistic learning across organization hierarchies” (p.16). Developing systems and societal-level thinking could take student affairs work to the next level. Kezar (2006) offers insight as to why sociological thinking is less prevalent, stating that perhaps this is due to the nature of the academy itself:

Leadership has always been part of the great story of social evolution, however, helping to empower individuals and create social change. Yet the emphasis on empowerment and social change in formal institutions such as organizations, colleges, and universities is a newer affiliation. (Kezar, p. x)

Another possible culprit is the lack of complex theories of leadership that explain systems-level issues. The NLERA cites Yukl’s (2009) wise observation, “instead of trying to extend dyadic theories of leadership to explain organization-level processes, it is much better to develop new conceptual frameworks that are more relevant and comprehensive” (p. 50). The rise of shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003), adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1994), and complexity theory (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007) provide an emerging empirical foundation for practitioners seeking to enact leadership at the systems level.

A final priority that provides an opportunity for the advancement of leadership education within student affairs and higher education is Priority Seven, global and intercultural leadership.

The priority emphasizes “global competence is increasingly a priority within higher education” (Andenoro et al., 2013, p. 28). Global leadership knowledge and intercultural competence are desired outcomes of leadership education, and they both warrant additional research in order to more fully develop this knowledge base and to prepare leadership learners to be able to affect positive change in the global society. An understanding of and ability to interact effectively within and across other cultures is necessary for effective leadership in our increasingly global society (Earnest, 2003; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004). In fact, some believe the most important leadership challenge today is working across cultural differences and cultural boundaries to accomplish change (Wibbeke, 2009). Likely due in part to this increased emphasis on global leadership, there are a growing number of international leadership education initiatives which encourage students to expand their perspectives and worldviews. This in turn challenges and broadens their thinking about themselves and about leadership (Montgomery & Arensdorf, 2012; Robinson, 2005). Although there is an increase of such initiatives (see for example *The Journal of Leadership Studies* May 2012 issue and Rosch & Haber-Curran, 2013), there is scant research on these endeavors, and the existing research is limited in scope.

As is noted in Priority Seven, greater focus on global and intercultural leadership can provide an opportunity to internationalize the leadership curriculum, which traditionally and still today strongly emphasizes Western conceptualizations of leadership. In order to accomplish this, the knowledge and research base on global leadership perspectives must be broadened, and so must also the worldviews, perspectives, and global competence of leadership educators. This is an adaptive challenge that will require considerable time and attention, but expanding the landscape of leadership education in these ways will allow for the design and delivery of globally relevant leadership curriculum in order to help students develop the leadership knowledge and capacities to address domestic and global leadership issues and challenges.

Recommendations

This manuscript provides a number of specific recommendations for future research and leadership education practice within student affairs, as well as broader discussions of ways student affairs educators can enact and contribute to the NLERA agenda. As is apparent in the discussion above, student affairs educators have much to be proud of related to the work of developing the leadership capacity of students through leadership programs and initiatives. Student affairs educators demonstrate many of the capacities outlined in the NLERA necessary to deliver and assess effective leadership education initiatives. The data-driven, student-focused, and developmental context of student affairs fosters leadership education in an environment that both supports our work and challenges us to continuously improve.

More research is needed into the effects of student affairs educators’ leadership education efforts, especially research that includes complex modeling and multivariate analyses. Increasing the research base of leadership education within student affairs will not only lead to better practice, it can also highlight innovative work and inform the broader discipline of leadership

education. Of course, as outlined in the challenges section above, many student affairs educators working with leadership programs are pressed to find dedicated time to conduct research. Thus, collaborations with researchers and faculty members who can provide expertise can prove to be mutually beneficial. Further, partnering with leadership educators across campuses can lead to greater resources for more robust and comprehensive research agendas.

Additionally, student affairs educators are uniquely suited to challenge traditional paradigms of leadership education, development, and research. A focus on critical theory and constructivist paradigms may reveal insights into the power dynamics and inequalities often associated with leadership. Student affairs educators' commitment to creating diverse and just communities invite thinking about issues of intersectionality, identity, and community in leadership. It is essential to interrogate the underlying assumptions and unstated privileges embedded in the work of leadership education, and student affairs educators should continue to grapple with these questions.

More work is needed on the relationship between learning and leadership, and the contributions of cognitive, affective, and efficacy-related dimensions of leadership. As an interdisciplinary and integrative field, student affairs educators are adept at boundary-spanning activities and the work of translation. It is imperative to bring these lenses to leadership education. The rapidly changing and complex nature of student affairs work also begs questions about how complexity theory, adaptive leadership, and other emergent models might inform practice. Questions about the effects of context on leadership are rarely addressed.

Finally, student affairs educators must never lose sight of the preeminent goal to educate the whole student. Students come to leadership with a variety of preconceptions, and it is the job of the educator to create safe and optimally challenging spaces where students are encouraged to evolve more complex ways of thinking and being. It must be remembered that the effects of leadership are both individual and collective, and the work is iterative. As the field seeks to enact and inform the National Leadership Education Research Agenda, the *Student Personnel Point of View* reminds us to always address the student as an integrated whole – as “a human personality living, working, and growing in a democratic society” (American Council on Education, 1949, p. 18).

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