

Advancing the Discipline of Leadership Studies

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The best way to describe the current status of Leadership Studies is that it is an “emerging discipline.” Few universities have departments, or even programs, in Leadership, and those that do exist usually have a modifier (e.g., “*Organizational Leadership*,” “*Educational Leadership*”), so we are, at best, emerging as a discipline, but I am certain that we will one day be there. Of course, there are those both outside of the study of leadership (many!) and scholars of leadership (some), who disagree that Leadership Studies is a discipline, and a portion of those would argue that it never should or could become one.

My intent in this brief commentary is to try to assess the current state of Leadership Studies as a discipline, using the characteristics of an academic discipline that have been discussed more fully elsewhere (Riggio, 2011). I will then try to provide some guidelines for advancing the discipline of Leadership Studies, recommendations for Leadership Studies programs, as well as exhortations to adhere to exemplary practices in the academic study and teaching of leadership.

What is an Academic Discipline?

There really is no firm answer to this question. Academic disciplines seem to emerge and are usually recognized by consent – if departments and substantial programs exist in universities, and a majority of faculty recognize those departments or programs, then a field of inquiry is labeled a “discipline.” There are theories of academic disciplines, with the most popular being Kuhn’s (1962) theory of scientific revolutions, and these theories tend to agree about the characteristics that define an academic discipline.

Consensus is the first, and perhaps most important, characteristic of a discipline. Consensus refers to shared agreement about: (1) a circumscribed knowledge base, (2) research methodology, (3) content and procedures for training, and (4) professional, scholarly journals and association(s). It is this critical element of consensus that is holding back Leadership Studies from achieving disciplinary status, so let’s look at each component in more detail.

There is a generally held belief that knowledge about leadership is “all over the place.” Different disciplines look at leadership differently, define it differently, have unique theories, and it is perceived that there is little agreement by scholars on the body of knowledge of Leadership Studies. This is simply not true. Look at any popular leadership textbook (and by

“popular” I mean textbooks that sell comparatively very well; leadership is a big textbook market!). The tables of contents of these texts are remarkably similar. True, most of the theories of leadership have their roots in Psychology or Business Management, and many of the examples are either work-related or drawn from politics, but the body of knowledge, and what is taught to students, is remarkably similar. Intro to Leadership looks a lot like Intro to Any Recognized Academic Discipline.

How about the methods used to study leadership? Again, there is a great deal of agreement, with the vast majority of published studies using quantitative or qualitative methods that are grounded in the social sciences, but also include case studies, historiographical methods, and other methodologies borrowed from various disciplines. But more and more that is the case in established disciplines – methods developed in one discipline are adapted and being used by other disciplines. We are all using established methods, and if you don’t believe that, just try to get a study published in a reputable journal using some unique or rare methodology.

Is there agreement about the curricular aspects of Leadership Studies? Well, yes and no. Although many college courses in leadership look like courses in other disciplines, there is variance. I have visited lots of leadership courses in the past two decades at a variety of institutions. Based on my observations, I can say that leadership programs housed in business schools look like other business courses, but there is more emphasis on experiential learning and more team-based, project-driven approaches. In contrast, leadership programs in schools of education tend to be much more group-based, cooperative learning oriented, but still look a lot like other courses in education schools. At my own institution, leadership courses have a liberal arts flavor, although our courses are more applications oriented than many other liberal arts courses. In short, courses in leadership aren’t all that different. There is a belief among many academics that leadership courses are “soft” courses – touchy-feely and non-rigorous. Although that may be true for some programs, for the most part, leadership courses look a lot like other college courses – some are rigorous, some aren’t.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for an academic discipline is whether the subject area has dedicated journals and a professional association (or multiple associations) for scholars to present research and exchange ideas. As far as journals, there are several established leadership journals, including *The Leadership Quarterly*, *Leadership*, and the *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*. While the first and third are tied to Management and Organizational Psychology, the SAGE-published journal, *Leadership*, is less aligned with a traditional discipline and publishes leadership research emanating from a wide range of disciplines. More recently, other journals have been established, including leadership journals that focus on leadership education/teaching, and the very new journal, *Leadership and the Humanities*. As far as dedicated journals, Leadership Studies has more than its share.

The issue of a professional association where all or most leadership scholars convene is a bit more problematic. Leadership scholars who are more business management-oriented have

traditionally been members of the *Academy of Management*, which has a “Network of Leadership Scholars” who meet annually (although it is important to note that Leadership does not have a divisional or interest group designation with the *Academy*). Some of the more psychologically oriented leadership scholars attend the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (SIOP) meetings, and leadership is one of the largest subject categories at both the *Academy of Management* and SIOP. The *International Leadership Association* (ILA) has attempted to become *the* professional organization for leadership scholars, but relatively few scholars are members or regularly attend ILA meetings. The lack of an association that counts the majority of leadership scholars among its members is clearly holding back Leadership Studies from disciplinary status. Professional academic associations are quite important in promoting a unified scholarly presence in academia, and in lobbying for recognition for the discipline.

In sum, although Leadership Studies meets some of the criteria for disciplinary status, it falls a bit short in some of the others. As a result, it is clear that at best Leadership Studies is an emerging discipline. The academic world moves at a glacial pace (after all, we still wear medieval robes). As a result, the path to disciplinary status is a long and arduous one. However, there are a number of issues and concerns that Leadership Studies scholars need to be aware of. Here are the factors that are holding us back from disciplinary status, and the recommendations/implications for Leadership Studies programs.

Leadership Studies: The Way Forward

If we are going to advance Leadership Studies as a distinct academic discipline, there are several issues that need to be considered, as well as some “best practices” that need to be adhered to by leadership programs.

First and foremost, leadership programs need to be academically rigorous. This represents a multifaceted challenge for some programs. There is a need for rigorous coursework, taught by accomplished faculty. The problem is that with the fast growth of academic leadership programs, has led to a dearth of qualified faculty who can teach in them. Hopefully, this situation will resolve itself as there are a growing number of new Ph.D.s who are focused on leadership research, and growth in the number of leadership graduate programs. An important caution, however, concerns the academic rigor of these graduate programs. It is essential that leadership graduate programs teach state-of-the-art research methodology and statistical analysis. Conducting sound research in leadership is not easy because of the complexity of the subject matter. If Leadership Studies is to be respected as a discipline, it is imperative that those obtaining doctorates in leadership are qualified to conduct good research. This is not to suggest that all doctoral students intend to go into academic research careers, but even those going into practice or teaching must have a good grasp of the methodologies used to conduct leadership research. This is also true of undergraduate programs in Leadership Studies. They need to be

solid academic courses and minors/majors in Leadership need to be challenging and well thought out (see Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003).

The teaching of leadership also has to be rigorous. There are a variety of more popular trade books and theories on leadership that are designed for a general, but not an academic, audience. It is important to avoid “watering down” leadership courses. It is encouraging to note that the best-selling textbooks on leadership are academically rigorous and represent much of the best research on the topic. It is also imperative to engage in pedagogical “best practices,” as suggested by the NLE Research Agenda. An important part of the teaching and learning agenda is to engage in continuous program assessment and improvement. Because Leadership Studies is still emerging, there are no accrediting bodies or associations who can provide THE answers to guide program design and evaluation efforts, but relying on established programs and noted experts in assisting design and evaluation efforts can help.

Another important concern in charting our way forward is to be broad and “trans-disciplinary” in our approach. The study of leadership crosses numerous disciplines in the social sciences, applied sciences, and humanities. It is not enough to study and understand leadership from a single disciplinary (or disciplinary cluster) approach. For example, the NLE Research Agenda recognizes some disciplinary contributions to leadership studies, particularly those emanating from the social sciences (e.g., Psychology, Sociology, etc.), but there are many other contributions from other disciplines that should be incorporated. To be a truly educated leadership scholar requires a broad base of knowledge.

As I have suggested, a large part of being recognized as an academic discipline is related to promotion of the disciplinary identity. The greater the number of departments or programs with leadership in their name, the greater the number of leadership courses, and the more faculty whose titles suggest some affiliation with Leadership Studies, the more likely, and the sooner, we will be recognized as a stand-alone discipline. To this end, it is important to become engaged in the academic world of Leadership Studies. Engage in professional development. Join professional associations, such as the International Leadership Association or the Academy of Management’s Network of Leadership Scholars, or teaching associations, such as the Association of Leadership Educators. Attend their conferences and participate. Learn from colleagues who come from different disciplinary perspectives and explore how they study leadership. Read the journals. Importantly, promote the discipline, and if you don’t believe that Leadership Studies is, or should be, a discipline, at least promote the legitimacy of leadership as a topic for scholarly study.

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