The Role of Civic Engagement in Undergraduate Leadership Courses

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Abstract

Undergraduate leadership courses are becoming increasingly important venues to promote civic engagement. Despite their prominence, the nature of civic engagement in leadership courses has not been examined systematically. This study examined 77 introductory undergraduate leadership courses and the role of civic engagement in these courses. Results indicate that civic engagement components are not widely utilized, and when they are part of the curricula, their implementation and design vary. Recommendations for improving undergraduate leadership curricula are offered.

Introduction

Developing students' capacities to be engaged members of society is an important historical and contemporary aim within higher education (Ehrlich, 2000; Jacoby, 2009). Service-learning, volunteer programs, student organization involvement, dialogue programs, and community partnerships are prominent ways in which educators work toward fulfilling the civic mission of higher education. Leadership courses have also become important mechanisms to prepare students to be engaged members of society. Leadership education courses, which are designed to build students' leadership capacities for broad application beyond their current roles (Roberts & Ullom, 1989), are mainstays on college campuses, and an increasing number of institutions now offer academic leadership majors and minors. While leadership curricula vary, many courses connect leadership and civic engagement through adding experiential civic components to the course such as volunteering requirements, service-learning projects, action plans to address social issues, or working to solve campus or community concerns (Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, & Arensdorf, 2006; Jacoby, 2009).

Despite the theoretical and practical connections between leadership and civic engagement, especially those connections found in many undergraduate leadership course syllabi, the nature of civic engagement in leadership courses has not been examined systematically. This study

sought to fill this void. In addition, the ongoing critique of civic engagement in higher education inspired our investigation. Several scholars have challenged higher education administrators and faculty to think more critically about community voice, inequity, power, and privilege in civic engagement programs (Rhoads, 1997; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Strait & Lima, 2009). Finally, as colleges and universities combine leadership and civic engagement under one umbrella in their organizational structures, the need to better understand the intersections of these two constructs remains vital.

A review of literature is first presented to strengthen the connections between leadership and civic engagement. A description of the study design is presented next, followed by the results section. Discussion and implications for research and practice follow.

Literature Review

The Proliferation of Leadership Education

Formalized undergraduate leadership education is a relatively new phenomenon, with nascent programs and centers emerging in the early 1970s (Roberts, 2007). The burgeoning of leadership education in the 1970s led to the formation of *Student Leadership Programs in Higher Education* (Roberts, 1981) with the goal of organizing and synthesizing emergent theory and practice of leadership education in higher education. Thirty years later, almost every college or university in the United States offers some form of undergraduate leadership curriculum, through classes, minors, majors, and even schools of leadership (Brungardt et al., 2006). Komives (2011) traces the professionalization of leadership education in higher education, and shows how leadership programs and services began in earnest in the 1970s and have now blossomed into an industry complete with courses, minors, majors, institutes, centers, associations, standards, and academic journals.

Established in 1989, the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond was the first school of leadership studies for undergraduate students. With many formal leadership schools forming shortly thereafter and almost every campus in the United States offering leadership majors, minors, or individual courses (Roberts, 2007), the impact of curricular leadership programs on student learning and development cannot be understated. While the nature of the construct of leadership undoubtedly varies within leadership courses, leadership is commonly construed as a collaborative process resulting in positive change (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007).

Leadership Education and Civic Engagement

Civic engagement serves an important role in leadership education within higher education. Higher education has always maintained a commitment to preparing engaged citizens (Colby, Beaumont, Ehrlich, & Corngold, 2007; Ehrlich, 2000; Jacoby, 2009). With a resurgence of civic engagement in higher education in the last two decades, leadership programs have become important venues to build students' civic capacities. Other programs and services that have signaled the rapid expansion of civic engagement in higher education include service-learning, volunteer programs, engaged scholarship, and community partnerships (Jacoby, 2009). These

civic engagement efforts were largely a response to a lack of civic engagement in greater American society (Ehrlich, 2000; Putnam, 2000).

The rise of civic engagement efforts has paralleled the expansion of curricular leadership programs in higher education but has not always had a formalized relationship in practice. However, the relationship between leadership education and civic engagement is both theoretical and empirically validated. From a theoretical standpoint, civic engagement is an important vehicle to build students' leadership capacities wherein it offers experiential learning components critical to the learning process (Dewey, 1923; Kolb, 1981). As well, Hughes, Ginnet, and Curphy (2006) argued that leadership education must build students capacities to solve real-world, complex issues, validating Komives (2011) who noted that leadership helps fulfill the civic mission of colleges and universities. Leadership education, then, must not rely exclusively on complex theories and classroom simulations and activities; it must incorporate elements of real world problem solving to be most effective. Civic engagement offers practical experiences to complement and reinforce leadership theory and build leadership capacities. Several prominent models in undergraduate leadership courses connect leadership and civic engagement, including the social change model of leadership (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996) and the relational leadership model (Komives et al., 2007). Empirically, civic engagement efforts (e.g., service-learning, community service) have been shown to be important for building students' leadership capacities. The Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) shows that experiential civic components are powerful mechanisms for building a wide range of students' leadership capacities (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Astin et al.'s (2000) study of 22,236 undergraduates found that service—either as part of a course or as a co-curricular activity—is positively correlated with leadership outcomes. Another study found that both community service and service-learning were equally effective at building students' leadership capacities (Vogelsang & Astin, 2000). In their in-depth study of a leadership course with a service-learning requirement, Sessa, Matos, and Hopkins (2009) found that service-learning deepened students' learning about leadership.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) further connects curricular leadership and civic engagement. CAS establishes standards for student affairs functional areas and programs in order to enhance the quality of student learning and development. Although they have standards for leadership programs in general and do not distinguish between co-curricular and curricular domains, their standards require that leadership programs collaborate with community partners and have learning outcomes in the humanitarianism and civic engagement domains (CAS, 2009). As well, Zimmerman-Oster and Burkhardt's (1999) study of 31 leadership programs (co-curricular) found that learning outcomes in leadership programs almost always included goals related to civic engagement.

Civic Engagement and Diversity

An important reason why civic engagement efforts are effective mechanisms to facilitate growth in students' leadership is because of the diversity and broadening of perspectives that active involvement in the community can provide. Civic engagement experiences such as community service or service-learning can present students with powerful learning opportunities to meet and interact with individuals different from themselves. Civic engagement experiences often provide

students with opportunities for dissonance. When students encounter powerful moments of learning that challenge their current ways of knowing, the opportunity for growth and learning are greatly increased (Kolb, 1981). Herbers and Mullins Nelson (2009) sought to explore how disorienting dilemmas (i.e., service experiences) used in educational settings could bring about perspective transformation amongst students. They found that service-learning offers particular transformative power that not only provides opportunities for dissonance, but provides guidance and support for students to grow and develop from these disorienting experiences. Though not every student was affected by each service experience, many were, through reflection, brought to either reject or reform their personal perspectives in light of their personal disorienting dilemma. Constructing experiences that provoke students' underlying assumptions and creating disorienting dilemmas for them creates great potential to guide students towards new perspectives and understandings of others.

Positive experiences with diverse others have been shown to positively predict college students' leadership development (Astin, 1993; Parker & Pascarella, 2012). Similarly, leadership development has been shown to be a significant predictor of students' social justice orientation (Keen & Hall, 2009). Civic engagement is thus an important mechanism for fostering leadership development in part because of the opportunity to learn from a diverse group of people in an experiential setting.

Summary of Literature

A recommitment to the civic mission of higher education, the proliferation of curricular leadership programs, and post-industrial definitions and models of leadership (Rost 1991) in the past twenty years have led to a tacit symbiotic relationship between leadership and civic engagement. However, this relationship remains understudied (Kezar et al., 2006), especially within the formal curriculum. The need to first study and then strengthen the civic engagement components in leadership courses is important given the myriad issues that often accompany civic engagement (e.g., unequal power relationships, burden on communities, privilege). The need to understand the role of diversity in undergraduate leadership courses is relatedly important as well. Some evidence suggests that the majority of civic components in leadership programs relate only to volunteering (Colby et al., 2007), which further suggests the need to study and strengthen the civic aspects of leadership courses. A more systematic examination of the role of civic engagement in leadership curricula would help illuminate this gap.

Study Design

We collected 77 syllabi through Internet searching of introduction to leadership courses at colleges and universities, an open call for syllabi on a national leadership listserv, and sample syllabi on a national clearinghouse for leadership programs. The sample included 60 four-year colleges and universities (88% public, 12% private) from a cross section of the United States. Eight institutions were religiously affiliated. Selection criteria were introductory leadership courses worth at least two credits, courses taught in the last ten years, and courses without a special topic designation (e.g., women's leadership, honors). We chose to study only introduction to leadership courses because introductory courses reach a broader audience and are often the only leadership-specific course students take. The research question guiding the study

was, "What is the role and nature of civic engagement in undergraduate leadership courses?" The nature of introductory leadership courses was first explored, which includes sponsoring department, nature of instructor (i.e., administrators, faculty), primary course text, teaching pedagogy, and assignments. Next, we discerned which courses had explicit civic engagement components (e.g., service-learning requirements, readings on civic engagement, community projects) and evaluated these components based on the following criteria: individual versus group civic experiences, who facilitates the civic experiences, number of hours required, mechanisms for reflection, nature of assignment, and the role of community partners in the course.

Limitations

This study contained several limitations of note. First, with almost every college or university offering academic leadership courses (Brungardt et al., 2006), 77 syllabi is likely not a representative sample. While we were exhaustive in our efforts to find syllabi that met our sampling criteria, readers should exercise caution in generalizing these results. Our interpretations of the syllabi should also be subject to scrutiny. Discerning pedagogical practices and attributes of civic engagement components, while possible, require a certain amount of inference. To mitigate these issues, we utilized analytic triangulation (Patton, 2002), which required both researchers to examine the data independently and then make consensus decisions about classifying the data together. When collective agreement on inferences could not be made for certain elements in the syllabus, those elements were not counted. This process helped mitigate issues of subjectivity in making decisions.

Results

Several results of the analysis are worthy of attention. First, 21 out of the 77 undergraduate introductory leadership courses had civic engagement components as part of the curriculum. Those courses that contained a civic engagement component varied greatly in design and scope. Few courses explicitly recognize or provide evidence and support for thinking critically about the tensions associated with civic engagement. Table 1 contains overall course characteristics, including the department leadership courses were housed in, who taught the courses, the culminating assignment, primary course text, and teaching pedagogy. Table 2 presents characteristics of the civic engagement components contained in the 21 courses that offered them. Overall course characteristics are first discussed, followed by characteristics of the civic engagement components. Discussions and implications of these findings are explored in the next section.

TABLE 1
Overall Course Characteristics within Leadership Course Syllabi (*n*=77)

Department[a]	Taught By	Culminating Assignment	Primary Course Text[b]	Teaching Pedagogy[c]	Diversity Component[d]
(16) Education **(9) Leadership Studies** **(3) Interdisciplinary Studies**	(39) Staff (33) Faculty (4) Both	(25) Final Paper (23) Final Exam (14) Final Presentation (11) None	(22) *Exploring Leadership* (Komives et al., 2007) (11) *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Northouse, 2007) (3) *The Leader's Companion* (Wren, 1995)	(64) student-centered pedagogy (13) prescriptive, teacher-centered pedagogy	(30) Courses contained an element of diversity (11 contained only one session)

Note. Attributes that do not add up to the total (n=77) were not able to be discerned from the syllabi unless otherwise noted.
[a]Departments that only appeared once are not listed in the table.
[b]Texts that were used less than two times were not listed.
[c]Teaching pedagogies were discerned from statements on teaching and nature of assignments contained in the syllabi.
[d]While 30 courses contained elements of diversity, 11 contained a maximum of one session devoted to diverse or multicultural leadership as opposed to an infusion of diversity elements throughout the course.

Overall Course Characteristics

Some important overall course characteristics are essential to gain better context for the civic engagement components. Table 1 contains a summary of these results. A few key results from the analysis show:

- Staff members (i.e., non-faculty) were the primary instructors of introduction to leadership courses (n=39/77).
- Introduction to leadership courses were taught in 18 different departments, but primarily housed in education (*n*=16).
- Eleven courses did not have a culminating assignment. Those courses with culminating assignments were one of three options: final papers (n=25), final examinations (n=23), and final presentations (n=14).
- *Exploring Leadership* (Komives et al., 2007) was the most widely used textbook, which was used in 22 courses. *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Northouse, 2007) was the second most widely used text, found in 11 courses.
- Teaching pedagogy relied heavily on small group discussion and student-driven learning outcomes. Instructors preferred active participation and utilized multiple venues to promote discussion and reflection such as blogging and journaling. A small number (n=13/77) of courses were prescriptive in nature, utilizing rote learning techniques and focusing on memorization of leadership theories and concepts.
- Less than half (n=30) of the leadership courses included specific content on diversity. Of those 30 courses, 11 had only one session devoted to the intersections of diversity and leadership.

TABLE 2
Civic Engagement Components within Leadership Course Syllabi (n=21)

Civic Engagement Work	Civic Engagement Facilitated By	Mechanisms for Reflection	Number of Service Hours Required	Ongoing Community Organization Partnerships	Community Partner Bearing on Grade
(9) Individual **(7) Group** **(5) Both**	(10) Student (8) Instructor	(12) Journals (5) Cumulative Final Reflection Assignments (4) Reflection Essays	(11) No Specific Requirement (9) Less than 15 (1) Less than 5	(7) Ongoing Partnerships	(3) Community Partners Bearing on Student Grade

Note. Attributes that do not add up to the total (n=21) were not able to be discerned from the syllabi.

Civic Engagement

In examining the civic engagement aspects of the introduction to leadership courses, several noteworthy findings emerged:

- Only slightly more than a quarter of the courses (21/77) had a civic component.
- Of those courses that included a civic engagement component, nine of them were individual projects, seven were group projects, and five included both individual and group civic engagement projects. The instructor facilitated only 10 of the 21 projects, while students facilitated 8 of the projects (the nature of the other three projects was not able to be discerned).
- 11 of the 21 projects did not have a designated amount of service hours required. The other 10 projects all had requirements less than 15 hours per semester.
- Seven of the 21 projects had ongoing partnerships with community agencies. Three of those agencies had some bearing on students' grades.
- To help students make meaning of their civic experiences, all of the courses utilized self-reflection in their assignments, either through journals (n=12), cumulative final reflection assignments (n=5), or reflection essays (n=4).

Discussion and Implications

Several findings from this study hold important implications for both research and practice. We discuss the implications here in hopes of informing the creation and implementation of undergraduate leadership education.

First, only slightly more than a quarter of the courses (21/77) had a civic component. There is, of course, legitimate question if all introductory leadership courses should have civic engagement components. Civic engagement offers students an invaluable opportunity to apply leadership skills and theories, in addition to building their leadership capacities. Incorporating civic engagement into the design of leadership courses also helps fulfill institutional mission statements (Jacoby, 2009). Other mechanisms allow students to apply leadership theory (e.g., in-class simulations or projects) but suffer from the artificiality and insular nature of the classroom environment. Since making change is an important aspect of leadership, practical opportunities to work toward bringing about change are important and should be considered in the design of leadership courses.

For those courses that had a civic engagement component, the onus for identifying and coordinating experiences in the community fell on students. When community-based civic experiences have a lack of coordination, they can become burdens to the community organizations they are trying to help and provide students with disparate or negative learning experiences (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Stoecker & Tryon, 2009; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2000). Community agencies, which are often the sites for civic experiences, have voiced concerns over students' involvement in their work such as not having a need for help, needs that do not fit neatly into semesters, extensive training programs, and a lack of capacity to process student interest (Stoecker & Tryon, 2009). With 10 of the 21 projects in the current study having requirements of less than 15 total hours, the benefit of these short-term, sporadic civic components in leadership courses should be questioned. In this way, the community is cast as a laboratory in which students can hone personal leadership skills, which disproportionately benefits the students at the expense of the community. Instructors should be more intentional to establish partnerships with community agencies to minimize harm and ensure mutual benefit to

the community and the student. Creighton (2006) suggests several indicators of successful community partnerships, which include mission compatibility, equitable treatment, clarity of expectations and roles, mutually beneficial outcomes, and sustainability. These indicators are useful benchmarks upon which to build successful partnerships with community agencies. Only seven of the 77 syllabi in this study had enduring partnerships with community agencies. Only three community agencies had a bearing on students' grades, which further suggests the unequal role the community plays in these civic experiences and the need to create partnerships with community agencies.

Further, as students seek to make meaning of their civic experiences, the instructor's unfamiliarity with the site limits his/her ability to challenge students' thinking about their experiences. For instance, instructors unfamiliar with the chosen community organizations may face difficulty responding to students who describe the site staff as ungrateful for their help. Deconstructing the complexities of these situations becomes difficult when instructors are unfamiliar with sites and community partners' voices are not present. Instructors of these courses should play more formal roles in coordinating these civic experiences for students, either directly or through a campus-based volunteer or civic centers, to minimize the burdens to community agencies and reduce the disparate nature of civic experiences, which can thus bolster student learning and better meet community needs.

Another important finding connected to the issue of community partnerships is that slightly more than half (39/77) of introduction to leadership courses are taught by administrators (i.e., full-time higher education staff, graduate students). These trends are consistent with national data that show full-time faculty who hold terminal degrees teach less than half of courses at the college level (Hermanowicz, 2011). If the same instructors are not tapped consistently to teach introduction to leadership courses (which a cursory look at any college or university course catalog might indicate), the likelihood that strong, mutually beneficial partnerships will be formed is low. Although we were not able to discern the number of times instructors had taught a course, job titles and our anecdotal experiences having been involved with leadership education for several years suggest that introduction to leadership courses are often pushed to graduate students and entry-level professionals, both of whom have high turnover rates. With limited teaching experience and time to construct a course, the opportunity to develop meaningful civic experiences can be limited. The degree to which institutions can lessen turnover of instructors or negotiate lasting partnerships with community agencies impervious to the turnover of undergraduate leadership course instructors, stronger and more meaningful civic experiences can be built.

Each of the 21 courses that had a civic engagement component contained some mechanism for reflection to help students make meaning of their experiences. Journals, reflection essays, and final reflective assignments were common pedagogical components. In Sessa et al.'s (2009) intensive study of a leadership course, learning outcomes related to civic engagement were the most complex for students to achieve. They argue that leadership courses should provide ways to deepen students' understanding of civic engagement and leadership beyond standard reflections, essays, and projects. They suggest providing students with feedback on multiple rewrites of the same reflection, online reflections, and intentional trainings on how to write reflections that are more critical. Other suggestions could include reflections with community partners, scaffolding

of reflection prompts that reflect intentional deepening of thought, or inviting more experienced students from advanced leadership courses to reflect with current students.

That less than half of leadership courses contained any formal content on diversity should be alarming. Because leadership—irrespective of different definitions—requires interaction with others, the lack of any formal curricular dimensions that illuminate important differences in others is a potential weakness in developing students' leadership capacities. Leadership courses are often touted as being important spaces for students to develop their intercultural competence. Many scholars argue for the consideration of diversity and social justice in leadership (Astin & Astin, 2000; Bordas, 2007; Ostick & Wall, 2011). Leadership requires working with others who are different from oneself, which necessitates an intricate understanding of others' experiences and social identities. More advanced or specialty leadership courses (e.g., LGBT leadership, women's leadership) provide ample opportunity to explore the intersections of leadership and diversity; however, many students do not take advanced leadership courses and will thus not have any explicit exposure or connection to diversity. Ostick and Wall (2011) argue that diversity experiences should woven into all elements of leadership curricula. They state, "There is no doubt that leadership educators must contribute directly to a campus environment that is responsive to cultural considerations and the unique needs of diverse student populations" (p. 342). Instructors of introduction to leadership courses should thus seek to weave elements of diversity throughout the course in addition to highlighting specific models, theories, and literature bases that examine diversity in leadership.

Conclusion

Both leadership education and civic engagement have expanded in the past two decades. The intersections of these two constructs remains strong theoretically, but mostly unexplored in formal leadership curricula. Komives (2011) argues that educators should continue to examine how leadership helps fulfill higher education's civic mission as well as how leadership can be fostered across diverse groups. As the professionalization of leadership curricula continues to unfold, instructors of undergraduate leadership courses should work to strengthen these intersections and continue to incorporate civic engagement components. Further, instructors should work to make these experiences more meaningful through forming and bolstering community partnerships, intentional design of civic components, and formal diversity curricula woven throughout the curriculum.

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