

## **Leadership Studies and Liberal Education**

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### **Abstract**

This article explores leadership studies as a complementary and integrating discipline in undergraduate liberal education curricula. A significant historical purpose of liberal education was to liberate and prepare its graduates to be active and capable participants and leaders in social, economic, religious, and political realms. This historical purpose has become resurgent in recent critical examinations of liberal education. Some now argue that the undergraduate liberal education should return, in part, to preparing citizens for leadership responsibilities necessary to strengthen our communities, nation, and democratic institutions.

There appears to be a symbiotic relationship between liberal education and leadership studies. The knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for effective leadership appear to be closely aligned with the desired learning outcomes of a liberal arts education, regardless of major. This article concludes that leadership studies may be an important and beneficial component of undergraduate liberal education curricula.

### **Introduction**

"The call for leaders is one of the keynotes of our time" according to Pulitzer Prize winner and acclaimed leadership scholar James MacGregor Burns (1978, p. 451). The late John Gardner (1990, p. xxi), former U.S. presidential cabinet secretary and leadership author, observed that "the reappraisal of policy and practice that is being forced upon us by the swift flow of history opens up extraordinary opportunities for creative leadership."

Since its founding, the United States has expected higher education to provide for scientific and cultural advancement, prepare leaders, and preserve the capacity for democracy (Greater Expectations, 2002). Higher education responded admirably to that charge. In the last part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, higher education in the United States was criticized for losing focus of its core purposes and principles (Bunting, 1998; Greater Expectations, 2002; Rhodes, 2001).

The pendulum seems to be swinging back. There is a current call for liberal education to develop “global thinkers who, enjoying a sophisticated world view, consciously integrate their studies into the life of the community and the world” (Greater Expectations, 2002, p. 21). Engaging diverse people in a global environment is essential. Accordingly, some (Bunting, 1998; Greater Expectations, 2002) suggest that the undergraduate liberal education should return, in part, to preparing citizens for leadership responsibilities necessary to strengthen our communities, nation, and democratic institutions. In that context, leadership studies may be an important and beneficial component of undergraduate liberal education curricula.

Leadership education “sits at the nexus of two disciplines, the art and science of leadership and the art and science of education” (Gallagher, 2002, p. 2). This article explores contemporary ideas regarding that relationship.

### **Leadership as a Role**

A report of the Harvard University Leadership Roundtable 2001-2002 asserts that “the heroic model of leadership, in which larger-than-life heroes perform awe-inspiring feats, is unrealistic and misleading to students. A preferable model, one that would have greater relevance to students in their future leadership roles, is one that would focus on small acts of leadership and heroism performed in everyday life” (Center for Public Leadership, 2002, p. 16). The goal should be to prepare students to participate meaningfully in the leadership process (Brungardt, Gould, Moore, and Potts, 1997).

We can consider leadership as a reciprocal relationship process in which followers are influenced by someone acting in a leadership role, so that the followers and the leader genuinely want to accomplish an authentically shared goal, vision, or mission. Followers also have an important role in influencing the group and the leader, which is why leadership is considered a relational process (Komives, Lucas, and McMahon, 1998; Rost, 1995).

The word *role* is used because, in our daily lives, we may serve as in a leader role in some settings and in a follower role in many other settings. The person acting in the leader role goes first, shows the way, and is proactive in engaging others initially. The leadership role may shift from person to person as events dictate. Effective participants of the group can shift between follower and leader roles with dexterity as needed. Accordingly, in this article the word *leader* is intended to mean a person acting in a leadership role, not as a title of nobility.

Leadership involves establishing trust and achieving change through shaping vision, values, and culture. Leaders are needed who can identify important issues; heighten public awareness and understanding; develop imaginative solutions and strategies; and mobilize others to give of themselves to achieve the vision of a

better tomorrow. Leadership occurs in families, neighborhoods, communities, civic clubs, organizations, states, and nations. “Everyone needs to learn important leadership skills so as to allow leadership to flow in all directions rather than from a top-down direction only” (Hashem, 1997, p. 90). Liberal education may provide an opportunity for developing students to effectuate the role of leadership.

### **Leadership Study and Liberal Education Outcomes**

As noted above, there has been a reconsideration of the appropriate role of liberal education. For example, the American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) assembled a national panel of leaders from education, business, and government to conduct a two-year study of higher education in the United States. Their draft report, “Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College,” was issued in March 2002 and recommends that graduates become empowered, informed, and responsible for civic values (Greater expectations, 2002).

In other examples, Josiah Bunting, in *An Education for Our Time* (1998), argues that undergraduate education should cultivate not only the mind, but also leadership and service. Mary Marcy, co-director for the Project on the Future of Higher Education at Antioch University, writes that the aims of liberal education are the basis for an educated citizenry capable of engaging in the affairs of state (Marcy, 2002). This is important because in democracies power is dispersed; society needs informed citizen leaders who are prepared to accept the responsibility of self-governance.

Presidents of colleges represented in the Association of American Colleges and Universities have formed a campaign for the advancement of liberal education. Their purpose is to ensure college students gain the full benefits of a liberal education in response to the societal quest for understanding of the “most basic questions about social trust, civic duty, international justice, world cultures, and sustainable health” (AAC&U, 2002, p. A22).

Frank H. T. Rhodes, president emeritus of Cornell University, writing in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2001, p. 6) posits that undergraduate education should help provide students with “a sense of direction, with the self-discipline, values, and moral conviction to pursue it. These prominent examples above suggest a similar theme: the capacity and passion to engage others in making a positive difference in society. In a word, this is leadership.

Research has shown that persons who successfully fill leadership roles tend to engage in certain practices, share certain traits, and enact a strong moral analytical capability. Liberal education and the study of leadership help individuals acquire the intellectual, affective, and behavioral foundations that support effective leadership. To examine this idea further, we will consider facets of successful leadership in juxtaposition with recently prescribed goals of liberal education.

## Leadership Practices and Liberal Education Outcomes

According to the AAC&U presidents, a quality liberal education should aim to:

- develop intellectual and ethical judgment;
- expand cultural, societal, and scientific horizons;
- cultivate democratic and global knowledge and engagement; and
- prepare for successful involvement in a dynamic economy.

Students can draw from the cognitive foundations listed above to discern what is important, formulate a vision, and engage others in seeking a better future.

Extensive empirical research by Kouzes and Posner (1989) revealed five core practices for successful leadership: challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart.

- *Challenging the process* means to go first, foster change, take risks, make tough decisions, and effectively communicate with others.
- *Inspiring a shared vision* requires the leader to formulate and communicate a mental picture of desired ends and purposes.
- *Enabling others to act* means getting other people involved in decisions, sharing information, building cooperative relationships, and charging others with important and visible tasks.
- *Modeling the way* means to show clear convictions and live important values. Effective leaders encourage continued efforts through personal perseverance and enthusiasm.
- *Encouraging the heart* means celebrating team achievements and recognizing individual accomplishments.

The taxonomy above, while helpful, does not provide an exhaustive description of the behaviors required for effective leadership. For example, other skills include critical and creative thinking, problem solving, team building, conflict resolution, negotiation, and consensus building (Brungardt, Gould, Moore, and Potts, 1997). All of the skills outlined in this section can be developed in liberal studies and enhanced in concentrated leadership study. Welch (2000, p. 71) suggests that leadership studies should help students “to grasp the problems and issues facing society, to develop analytical and problem solving skills, and to learn to communicate and work effectively as members of a team . . . to establish goals and motivate others to achieve those goals.”

## Leadership Traits and Liberal Education Outcomes

According to Rhodes (2001) qualities common to university graduates should be:

- ability to understand problems within social contexts
- self-confidence and curiosity (quantitative and formal reasoning)
- a commitment to responsible citizenship
- a sense of direction, with the self-discipline, personal values, and moral conviction to pursue it.
- openness to others and the ability to communicate with clarity and precision
- an ability to get along with, and respect for, others

These qualities listed above appear congruent with traits desired of persons in leadership roles. Research efforts in the past 100 years have identified an extensive list of qualities, characteristics, or traits that have been attributed to persons successfully filling a leadership role. Northouse (2001) condensed this list to five traits that reflect the essence of the research findings: intelligence, self-confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability.

- *Intelligence* includes strong perceptual ability, honed reasoning skills, and the ability to craft a vision and make hard decisions. It also suggests a sense of direction and purpose, and the ability to evaluate and integrate competing possibilities.
- *Self-confidence* comprises self-assurance (but not arrogance) that the leader and followers can exert control over their mutual destiny, for the better.
- *Determination* involves tenacity, persistence in the face of obstacles, self-motivation, initiative, and being proactive in pursuing opportunities and solutions.
- *Integrity*, identified consistently in trait studies, is the essential ingredient in establishing trust with followers.
- *Sociability* includes extroversion, diplomacy, seeking cooperative relationships, and showing a genuine concern for the well-being of followers.

The outcomes of liberal education suggested by Rhodes seem supportive of the desired traits for successful leadership. In congruence with this view, the Greater Expectations draft report (2002) suggests that liberally educated students should have a sense of accountability for their actions and for social justice, intellectual honesty, active participation as a citizen, and the discernment of ethical consequences of decisions.

### **Moral-Analytical Component and Liberal Education Outcomes**

Leadership also has an important values, ethics, and moral-analytical component. When a person (leader) chooses to influence others to pursue a particular goal, that person is choosing to affect the lives of others. Selecting and promoting a vision is inherently a moral responsibility, because the vision is an expression of the values and moral choices of leader and followers. This is a serious undertaking that places moral responsibility on the leader to be open with followers regarding the intent and motivation for achieving the vision.

The essence is that followers should not be used as pawns to secure the self-serving goals of a leader. To borrow from philosopher Immanuel Kant, followers should be treated as ends in themselves, not merely a means to an end. Accordingly, leadership is a philosophical undertaking embodying a moral-analytical component (Fairholm, 1991).

Liberally educated graduates should be able to “weave a larger sense of commitment to ethical standards and moral reasoning into the fabric of life and work” and should accept “an active role in helping society shape its ethical values

and then in seeing those values in operation” (Greater Expectations, 2002, p. 19). Similarly, the Harvard University Leadership Roundtable suggested that aspiring leaders need to develop their capacity for ethical thinking, critically analyzing morality, synthesizing different value traditions and developing cohesion among them, communicating, and building trust with followers (Center for Public Leadership, 2002).

### **Integrating Leadership Study into the Liberal Education Curriculum**

Given the apparent similarities between leadership studies and liberal education, a vital question is, what does leadership studies provide that exposure to a general liberal education does not? Perkins (2002, personal communication) asserts that “leadership studies is not just a repackaging of liberal arts, but a conscious directing of liberal arts toward current issues and problems.” Leadership studies can provide a way, the how and why, to enact a liberal education (Perkins, 2002.). “Knowledge implies nothing to our purpose unless we act on it in some way” (Bunting, 1998, p. 20).

Leader development can be divided into at least three realms: behavioral, affective, and cognitive (Daft and Lengel, 1998; Komives, Lucas, and McMahan, 1998). Of course, there is interconnectivity among these three realms. Behavioral skills of leadership (written and oral communication, reasoning, team building, motivating, listening, planning) and affective commitments (personal responsibility, ethical foundation, choices of values, personal commitment) should be approached in the classrooms of many disciplines, modeled by faculty, and experienced outside of the classroom, in programs such as service learning.

Interweaving the behavioral and affective elements of leadership among courses in various disciplines is a key element to integrating leadership studies in a curriculum. This would involve faculty development and commitment to make it happen in the classrooms and elsewhere on campus. More detailed discussion on interweaving the behavioral and affective elements across disciplines is essential, but beyond the scope of this article. Perhaps others will take up this discussion.

The cognitive realm of leadership studies, in part, could be introduced to students using a Foundations of Leadership course at the first year or early sophomore level. The course would examine the nature of leadership to include the interaction of leaders, followers, and context in the leadership process. Students would explore historical and contemporary theories of leadership, to include the traits, practices, and moral-analytical elements important for successful leadership. In addition, students would learn characteristics of good followership, and examine contemporary societal factors that shape leadership context.

The first year leadership foundations course may include a field laboratory element that includes service, teamwork, followership, and examination of

leadership. The key would be for students to bring practical experience back into the classroom for analysis and critical reflection from a leadership view. At the junior or senior level, additional service learning opportunities would allow practice in leading teams.

As students traverse their other undergraduate courses, they would be prepared to identify linking concepts and build on the elements introduced in the foundations course. This is particularly viable because multiple disciplines support leadership study. These include political science, philosophy, history, sociology, psychology, business, education, literature, military science, and communication, among others.

For those students with a particular interest in a more in-depth study of leadership, a minor or concentration in leadership could be available as a program of study. For example, courses in the program might include Leadership Theory and Research, Values-based Leadership, and Leading Change, all of which are applicable across disciplines. A course on historical leaders or leadership in literature might be offered. Studying the lives of historical leaders--their achievements, strengths, failures, and weaknesses--is invaluable in learning how to successfully navigate the leadership process (Bunting, 1998).

A course related to Leadership Issues should be taken from the student's major field of study. Culture (context) has a significant affect on leadership, and a course on culture could be included. Finally, students in the program may benefit from a capstone Leadership Integration course. Detailed discussion of curriculum design for a minor is beyond the scope of this article, but these example courses provide a point of departure for further discussion.

## **Conclusion**

Quality liberal education prepares students for active participation in our dynamic global community (Greater Expectations, 2002). There are ample challenges, at home and abroad, awaiting future leaders. The need today is for university graduates who use their intellectual prowess and analytical skills to frame and seek answers to basic questions about the problems confronting their relevant communities.

There appears to be a symbiotic relationship between liberal education and leadership studies. Liberal learning "helps develop habits of mind that will enable students to appreciate a variety of issues, to think independently and critically, and to learn independently, outside as well as within their ultimate area of specialization" (Stearns, 2002, p. 43). Liberal education should "develop graduates who have intellectual power, mental agility, a deep understanding of human society in all its manifestations, and a sense of responsibility for their actions" (Greater Expectations, 2002).

The knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary for effective leadership seem closely aligned with the desired learning outcomes of a liberal arts education, regardless of major. "Leadership is--or can be made to be--the most genuinely interdisciplinary program I have known" (Burns, 2001). Multiple disciplines support leadership study. Leadership study can be a complementary and integrating discipline in undergraduate liberal arts curricula, empowering graduates to engage others in making a positive difference in their selected fields of endeavor. Leadership study can help empower students to enact their liberal education.

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