

## **A Content Analysis of Undergraduate Students' Perceived Reasons for Changes in Personal Leadership Behaviors**

**Michael Burbank**

Undergraduate Student

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communications

2116 TAMU

Texas A&M University

College Station, TX 77843-2116

[texasrinity13@gmail.com](mailto:texastrinity13@gmail.com)

**Summer F. Odom**

Assistant Professor

Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communications

2116 TAMU

Texas A&M University

College Station, TX 77843-2116

[summerodom@tamu.edu](mailto:summerodom@tamu.edu)

**M'Randa R. Sandlin**

Assistant Researcher

College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources

3050 Maile Way

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Honolulu, HI 96822-2231

[mranda.sandlin@yahoo.com](mailto:mranda.sandlin@yahoo.com)

### **Abstract**

Leadership educators seek to understand how they can better develop leadership among their students through formal and informal course experiences. The purpose of this study was to understand how undergraduate students perceive reasons for changes in their leadership practices, after completing a personal leadership education course. The course focused on the five exemplary practices of college students. As part of the course, students completed the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (S-LPI) as a pre and post assessment. A qualitative content analysis of 107 undergraduate student reflections from multiple sections of a leadership course was conducted to examine students' perceptions of what influenced their change in scores on the S-LPI assessment. Students perceived that the curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities of the course (including the high-impact service-learning project) affected their change in score for the leadership behavior(s) they intended to focus on throughout the semester. Students whose scores did not increase for the leadership behavior they chose to focus on still experienced leadership growth and development but attributed their growth to different items: their growth was in a different leadership behavior than intended or they developed a greater

understanding of the five practices which affected their self-assessed score.

## **Introduction**

Individuals learn and develop leadership through a variety of mediums such as formal coursework, youth and collegiate programs, educational experiences, and on-the-job experiences (Brungardt, 1997; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001; Dugan, 2006). Universities across the nation work to create meaningful coursework that allows students to learn about the field of leadership and develop their personal leadership skills. According to Huber (2002), the goal of leadership education is to provide opportunities for people to learn skills, competencies, and knowledge necessary to become successful leaders. The National Leadership Education Research Agenda (NLERA) puts forth the following definition of leadership education: “The pedagogical practice of facilitating leadership learning in an effort to build human capacity and is informed by leadership theory and research. It values and is inclusive of both curricular and co-curricular educational contexts” (Andenoro et al., 2013, p. 3).

Leadership is learned through both a formal process using curricular or classroom learning and an informal process using co-curricular means or activities outside the formal classroom (Andenoro et al., 2013). Leadership education and leadership development are often used interchangeably, but have distinctive meanings. Leadership development is the umbrella under which leadership education resides. Leadership development, as defined by Brungardt (1996), “refers to almost every form of growth or stage of development in the life cycle that promotes, encourages, and assists in one’s leadership potential” (p. 83). Leadership development refers to both formal and informal learning activities. Leadership education is a component of leadership development and focuses more on formal learning experiences such as a college course or professional seminar intended to teach specific leadership skills or concepts (Brungardt, 1996). Understanding the link between leadership development and leadership education is essential as leadership educators attempt to expand the capacities of individual students in the classroom through curricular activities and outside the classroom through co-curricular assignments. Leadership educators in formal settings, such as college classrooms, can influence leadership development by integrating informal activities into the structure of the formal classroom environment. Posner (2004) reinforced this concept when he stated, “Leadership development is now an integral part of the educational program of college students, with courses and activities scattered throughout the co-curricular experience” (p. 443).

High-impact practices have been defined as active learning experiences both inside and outside of the classroom (curricular and co-curricular) that increase student learning, engagement, and retention of information (Kuh, 2008). High-impact practices which have been identified by Kuh (2008) include: collaborative assignments and projects, common intellectual experiences, diversity/global learning, learning communities, and service-learning or community-based learning. By implementing high-impact practices along with teaching formal leadership content, leadership educators can enhance the leadership development of their students. High impact practices, like leading a team, can have positive implications for leadership development when paired with a leadership course. In his examination of leadership development, Grandzol (2011) found, “augmenting the leadership experience... with a formal course or reflection process would lead to even greater gains in leadership skills” (p. 67). This

supports the idea that high impact practices should be included within leadership education to promote student leadership development. The idea of incorporating high-impact practices into leadership courses is reinforced by Roberts' (2008) assertion that study alone is not sufficient for development. Furthermore, Wren (2001) contended "the unique nature of leadership requires its study to be a combination of intellectual inquiry, behavioral innovation, and practical application" (p. 5).

Service learning is a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008) that has been connected with significant gains in the essential learning outcomes of "deepening personal and social responsibility" and "practicing integrative and applied learning" (p. 6). Service learning is an instructional strategy that connects students with community partners to combine formal classroom learning to informal learning outside the classroom. According to Kuh (2008), "a key element... is the opportunity students have to both apply what they are learning in real-world settings and reflect in a classroom setting on their service experiences" (p. 11).

Through the high-impact practice of service learning, leadership educators have the unique capability to promote and facilitate students' reflective practices. This is significant as Roberts (2008) wrote that the ability of students to reflect "... will indeed be crucial to their success" (p. 126). Depth of learning and critical thinking can increase through journal writing and self-reflection (Jones & Brown, 1993; Lizzio & Wilson, 2007; Sessa, Matos, & Hopkins, 2009). A specific reflective practice that students can use is critical self-reflection. Mezirow (1990) identified critical self-reflection as a means of learning, or "the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action" (p. 1). The learning that accompanies critical self-reflection can result in valuable insight into a student's pattern of reaction (Mezirow, 1998). Educators must understand the significance of self-reflective practices with regards to facilitating adult learning and how it can be used for multiple purposes (Mezirow, 1998). Reflection combined with high-impact practices in leadership education has the potential to enhance students' leadership development.

As Posner (2012) noted, there is a need for studies that examine the influence of leadership development programs and classes to understand how leadership is developed. One model for leadership educators to use in order to effectively measure students' perceived leadership development is the Student-Leadership Practices Inventory (S-LPI) developed by Kouzes and Posner (1987). The S-LPI measures five leadership practices important for leaders to be most effective: (a) Model the Way, (b) Inspire a Shared Vision, (c) Challenge the Process, (d) Enable Others to Act, and (e) Encourage the Heart. The S-LPI can be assigned among any context to broadly measure the leadership practices of college students (Grandzol, 2011). Observations validate this tool as it pertains to this study of a personal leadership course. "The more student leaders reported having both opportunities to be leaders and to develop their leadership skills the more they engaged in each of the five leadership practices supports the predictive validity of the instrument and conceptual framework" (Posner, 2012, p. 232).

The leadership educators' task to develop student leadership skills aligns with priorities found within the NLERA (Andenoro et al., 2013). Priority Three of the NLERA tasks leadership educators to psychologically develop leaders, followers, and learners. Included in this priority

are development of leaders' self-awareness, self-esteem for leadership practice, creativity, self-agreement, self-sacrifice, and empowerment. According to the NLERA, these constructs "provide a powerful foundation for the learner" (p. 13), and they allow the learner to develop perspective for self within a group context (Andenoro et al., 2013). In this study, the examination of students' reflections about their changes in scores for the five leadership practices sought to describe students' development over the course of a semester in a personal leadership education course.

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based upon Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model reinforces reflective practice and observation as an integral part of students' ability to learn. Experiential learning creates knowledge that results from the transformation of experience and the understanding of that experience (Kolb, 1984; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984)

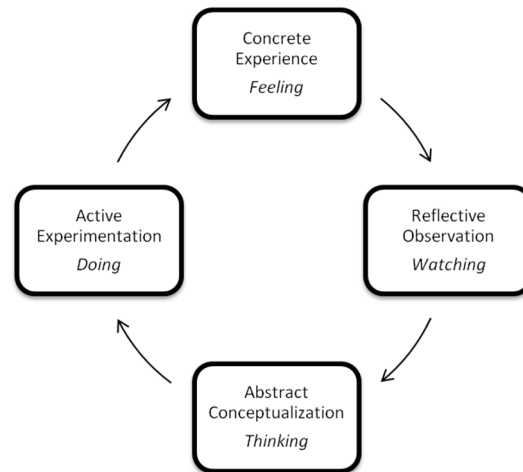


Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Model. Adapted from *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Copyright 1984 by Prentice Hall.

describes learning as a process linking education, work, and personal development. This model posits four points that are key to learning through experience: concrete experience, reflective observations, abstract conceptualizations, and active experimentation. These points are cyclical and each is unique to the learner's experiences (Kolb, 1984; see Figure 1).

In this study, Kolb's Experiential Learning Model (1984) guided students through the learning process. The class lectures consisted of personal leadership topics framed using *The Student Leadership Challenge: Five Practices of Exemplary Leaders* (Kouzes & Posner, 2008). Other topics discussed in the course include: emotional intelligence, values development, personal vision, creativity, authentic leadership, strengths, and personality types. Students participated in class discussion and completed the S-LPI assessment as part of the experience related to the five leadership practices. Students also completed high-impact practices including collaborative small-group assignments and a service-learning project.

Throughout the course, students individually reflected on their leadership behaviors (reflective observation) during and after the experiences through journaling. These reflections were written by the students in class as a requirement for the course. Students stated changes they expected to occur (abstract conceptualizations), and applied these changes to other parts of their life (active experimentation) such as their work places, student organizations, and course projects.

The active experimentation phase occurred throughout the semester as students practiced leadership in curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities including the high-impact practice required for the course, the service-learning growth project. Students then had continuous concrete experiences through the lectures and discussion about the five leadership practices over the course of the semester. This array of experiences, reflections, and conceptualizations allowed for students to participate in both formal and informal leadership development experiences while reflecting on their development as a leader.

This study sought to examine students' reflective observations and abstract conceptualizations of their S-LPI scores and what influenced their changes in scores for each of the five practices of exemplary leadership after completing a formal, personal leadership education course. We examined students' reflections about the changes in their S-LPI scores from the beginning to the end of the semester and specifically their attributions about what influenced these changes.

### **Context for the Study**

Although this is a content analysis and the data for the study consisted of the student reflections, the researchers feel it is important for the reader to understand the quantitative instrument the students completed as a pre/post assessment. Students in a personal leadership education course completed the online version of the Student-Leadership Practices Inventory (S-LPI; John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2014) as a course requirement. The S-LPI "identifies specific behaviors and actions that students report using when they are at their 'personal best as leaders'" (Posner, 2012, p. 222); the identified behaviors are Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. The instrument contained 30 questions and asked students to respond on a five-point summated scale (1=Rarely or Seldom; 2=Once in a While; 3=Sometimes; 4=Often; 5=Very Frequently).

This self-assessment was measured for reliability and validity by Posner (2012); a database of approximately 78,000 students was used to run the statistics. Internal reliability was found to be acceptable for each of the identified practices with the following Cronbach alpha coefficients: Model the Way ( $\alpha=.69$ ), Inspire a Shared Vision ( $\alpha=.78$ ), Challenge the Process ( $\alpha=.73$ ), Enable Others to Act ( $\alpha=.69$ ), and Encourage the Heart ( $\alpha=.80$ ). Validity was affirmed through normative analyses of leadership engagement and leadership behaviors, and predictive validity of the instrument was supported through analyses determining that students who engaged in leadership and leadership development opportunities were more engaged with each of the five leadership practices (Posner, 2012). Student's S-LPI scores were the basis of their reflections, which were analyzed for this study.

## Methods

The design for this study was a qualitative content analysis. A content analysis is a method used to study indirect human behavior through analysis of communications (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Huyn, 2012). Qualitative content analysis or ethnographic content analysis is a type of content analysis which refers to an approach to analyzing documents and allows categories “to emerge out of data and on recognizing significance for understanding the meaning in the context in which an item being analyzed appeared” (Bryman, 2012, p. 291). This study examined the reflections of students in a personal leadership education course during the fall 2013 semester in a department offering two leadership degrees and a leadership minor at a large land grant university to make sense of their experiences pertaining to the changes in frequency of their leadership behaviors. The students represented a criterion-type purposive sample as they were all required to meet an indicated criterion (Patton, 2002). The required criteria were as follows: the students were required to be enrolled in the personal leadership course, complete both S-LPI assessments, respond to the reflection prompts, and give their consent to participate in this study. Consent to participate was given after the course was completed as the researchers did not specifically require reflections of students for the purpose of collecting data. Student reflections were coded as S1-S162. Of these, 107 student reflections met all of the criteria standards set forth in the sampling procedures and were included in the data analysis. This was a required junior-level, undergraduate course for all students. Students ranged in age from 18-24 years. The leadership experience varied among each of the participants.

Students first completed the S-LPI assessment at the beginning of the semester before any content was presented. The students were sent a link via their university email to complete the online S-LPI assessment and reflect on their scores using the following reflection prompts:

- 1) For the rest of the semester, the leadership practices or behaviors I will focus my actions on are: \_\_\_\_\_. Explain how and why.
- 2) List the practice you do most frequently. What opportunities do you see to continue demonstrating that practice in the near future?
- 3) List the practice you do least frequently. Why do you believe this is your least used practice?

The course content was framed around the five leadership practices of Model the Way, Inspire a Shared Vision, Challenge the Process, Enable Others to Act, and Encourage the Heart. Students were also required to complete a service-learning growth project in order to give back to the community and to apply course content. Students were encouraged to choose a project that was personal to them. The students were given the freedom to design their own project. They also had the option to complete the project as a group or individually. However, each student was required to participate and document at least six hours of time on their project outside of class regardless of whether it was an individual or group project. The final project in the course consisted of a portfolio, which documented leadership learning from this service learning growth project through a six page reflection paper. At the conclusion of the semester, students were

again sent a link to complete the online S-LPI assessment, given their scores, and asked to reflect on the change in their scores (could have been an increase or decrease) using the following prompts:

- 1) Look at your initial response to Reflection Question 1. Did your new LPI report indicate an increase on this practice or behavior? If so, how do you feel you have focused your actions on that particular practice or behavior this semester? If not, why do you feel your report did not indicate an increase in this practice?
- 2) Of the 5 practices, which practice do you feel is most important for you to exemplify as a leader and why? Evaluate your report in regard to this practice (i.e. What is your score on this practice?) Are you currently doing this or is it a practice you need to develop?
- 3) Compare both of your “Five Practices Data Summary.” What overall changes do you see in your leadership practices from the beginning of the semester until now? What explanation would you have for these changes?

The data for this study were generated from document analyses of student reflections completed at the end of the semester about their change in S-LPI scores. The reflections were completed as part of a course assignment and were not analyzed until after the conclusion of the course. According to Bryman (2012), documents for qualitative content analysis should not “have been produced specifically for the purpose of social research” (p. 543).

To address the purpose of the study, the data were analyzed using the ethnographic content analysis (ECA) approach (Bryman, 2012). “ECA follows a recursive and reflexive movement between concept development-sampling-data, collection-data, coding-data, and analysis-interpretation” (Bryman, 2012, p. 559). Similar to the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the data were unitized, compared and integrated into units to investigate emergent themes, categorized, and reported as the students’ perceived reasons for changes in their score on the five exemplary leadership behaviors.

The trustworthiness of this study was established through Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) concepts of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through peer debriefing with other leadership faculty not involved in this study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); transferability was established through the use of purposive sampling and participant quotes throughout the findings of the study (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993); and dependability and confirmability were established through the use of audit trails, peer audits, and researcher-kept reflexive journals (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The data were coded before the analysis process began to ensure the confidentiality of the students and the respective data codes were included after the documented quotations to create an audit trail.

Reflexivity is a term used in qualitative research to suggest researchers “should be reflective about the implications of their methods, values, biases, and decisions for the knowledge of the social world they generate” (Bryman, 2012, p. 393). Two of the researchers in this study

were the instructors for the course in which the students produced reflections. In qualitative research, the “researcher is typically the primary instrument for data collection and analysis” (Merriam, 2009, p. 15). While this can be identified as a potential source of bias in the study, the analysis of the student reflections and consent to participate in the study was not conducted until the conclusion of the course. As another way to limit bias, names were removed and reflections were coded by someone other than the instructor before analysis was conducted. Furthermore, this study did not attempt to showcase that students increased their scores in each of the five exemplary leadership practices, but examined the perceived influences on the changes in students’ scores. The researchers truly wanted to understand what undergraduate students attributed to the changes in their scores throughout the semester while enrolled in a leadership course.

## **Results/Findings**

We wanted to understand what factors the students thought affected a change in their S-LPI scores both inside and outside of course content. While the themes were originally split into two categories which described students whose scores did increase and students whose scores did not increase, through intimacy with the data, the researchers discovered that students experienced growth and development whether or not their actual scores increased or decreased. Themes which emerged as reasons for changes in their scores of the five exemplary leadership behaviors included: curricular and co-curricular activities, extracurricular activities, focus for leadership behavior, and greater understanding of the five practices.

### **Curricular and co-curricular activities**

Students who reported that curricular and co-curricular activities had an impact on their increase in scores reflected about purposeful experiences in the course which allowed them to focus on the behavior. Students reported on the course content and assignments as means for application of the five leadership practices. “Ever since we had our lecture on Modeling the Way, I have tried to embrace that in my everyday life by acting how I expect other people to act and it has truly made me a better leader” (S6). Student S49 wrote, “I started to become more open with discussing my shared vision with others due to all the class small group activities... assignments on creating solid vision for my future also helped my score in this [Inspire a Shared Vision] category.” Increases in behavioral scores additionally occurred because the course required them “to communicate, take control, and make decisions” (S134) in projects and assignments. Similarly, the small group activities in class allowed students to “rely heavily on each other for grades, projects, and encouragement” (S86). Students were required to complete a service-learning growth project as part of the course assignments; students found this experience to be a means for applying their leadership behaviors. “I was able to focus my actions on Challenging the Process this semester by my service-learning growth project that I chose, as well as the organizations that I am involved in” (S25). Another student noted “with my service learning project I tried to inspire the kids to work hard and have fun in everything they do for their community” (S156). S148 indicated his involvement in the service project influenced his change in score: “I have focused my action this semester on Enabling Others to Act. I have worked on giving others the best opportunity to succeed. This was evident in my volunteer work completed this semester.” Likewise, student S4 said:



I have focused my actions on this behavior [Model the Way] through my service learning growth project. When I was there at the animal shelter it is very easy to complain about anything and everything and I did my best to Model the Way through reminding the team that what we are doing is for a purpose and we are working for something more than ourselves.

Further student reflection expounded that the service learning growth project influenced a positive increase in their scores. Student S19 explained, “Enable others to act and encouraging the heart went up in numbers on the score report...both of these practices were greatly demonstrated during my project.”

### **Extracurricular activities**

Extracurricular activities also had an impact on the increase of student scores on the S-LPI due to “active participation” (S139) by the students in the organization and/or workplace. “I have taken on more leadership roles in organizations I’m in...I believe I set the bar by being an example for members” (S139). Student S26 described their work as a server trainer where they “tried to get every other server on board [with new systems] and inspire them to strive for the same goal...I would always show them praise.” Similarly, student S71 reflected, “At work I have made a more careful effort to create expectations for myself and I have had my students create expectations for me and vice versa. I must uphold these expectations if I expect them to uphold theirs.” The effect of leadership behavior implementation was also seen in terms of follower empowerment. “I try to give other employees more freedom to do some of the jobs that I normally take care of. I have been able to trust people more and they now trust me more” (S32).

While students’ whose score(s) increased on the leadership behavior they intended to focus on expressed their S-LPI scores changed through participation in curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities, those students whose scores did not increase on the particular behavior still learned and practiced exemplary leadership behaviors. Students reflected that even though their scores may not have increased for the leadership behavior they intended to focus on, they still experienced growth and development in leadership behaviors but focused on a different leadership behavior than intended or had a greater understanding of the S-LPI assessment the second time they took it, which influenced their score on the particular leadership behavior,

### **Focus for leadership behavior**

Students revealed that they “may have been focused on other areas of leadership” (S162) and diverted from their initial intent, resulting in a lack of increase in their S-LPI scores for a particular leadership behavior. Student S124 stated, “I do not necessarily think I got worse at [Enabling Others to Act], but instead put more focus on other behaviors during the semester, thus taking a little away from the behavior” (S124). Students also indicated an effect of the personal, inward nature of the course material on their scores. “Since I was in class all semester, I can see why my behavior for Enabling Others to Act is less than at the beginning of the semester because I focused on myself” (S90). Others discovered the behavior they chose to focus on did not align with their core values.

I think that the reason I showed change in one area but not the other comes down to a question of values. While I did not have a problem with Enabling Others to Act (I actually find it quite useful) I have never had the encouraging mentality. I'm not easy on myself and don't go get myself a reward for small achievements so why would I be that way with other people? (S2)

Students acknowledge their focus on strengths during the semester could have affected their scores.

To me this means that I need to accept that I am not the best at this category [Enable Others to Act] and focus myself in other categories. I thought in the beginning of the semester that by working on my weaknesses it would make me a well-rounded individual. However, over the course of this semester, I have learned it is better to emphasize and grow in your strengths. (S89)

I feel that this practice was not strengthened because I focused more on Encouraging the Heart and Enabling Others to Act. Those two practices go along with my five strengths that I found out that I had in this course, making it easier to strengthen these practices. (S62)

The nature of the service learning projects that students chose was also considered a factor in students' focus on changing leadership behaviors. "My score went down two points because the service-learning project I worked on involved a lot more teamwork than I expected. This focused my attentions more on Inspire a Shared Vision" (S125).

Students' opportunities, life-situations, and "personal challenges" (S34) were also factors in their ability to apply the desired leadership behavior. Student S44 reflected, "I did not have very many opportunities to demonstrate Challenging the Process this semester." Student S152 further described:

As I reflect back on the class, I realize that as I learned about the different practices, I really connected and admired leaders from Model the Way. While I enjoyed learning about Encourage the Heart, and still hope to increase this practice, I ended up increasing Model the Way because of the opportunities I had this semester, as well as how I connected with the practice in class. (S152)

Student S9 described a situation in which their personal disagreement with an organization's leadership affected their ability to practice their desired behavior.

My report did not indicate an increase in Inspiring a Shared Vision. I believe the reason for this is because I related a lot of the answers for my survey with how I am in the [student organization], and I have a hard time believing in everything the [student organization] is changing, so it is difficult for me to promote that vision. (S9)

Difficulty to focus on a particular leadership behavior due to an absence of a desire to change was also cited as a reason for a lack of increase in S-LPI scores. Student S106 reflected,

“I tried to focus on Enabling Others to Act, but my report shows a negative change which is due to being hardwired to want to be in control and...not let others be a variable in my fate.” Student S64 described their difficulty, “I really struggle with thinking outside of the box and being creative. I like to take control of projects and situations...it is hard for me to take a step back and let others work with me to achieve our common goal.”

### **Greater understanding of the five practices**

Through the semester, students “gained a higher knowledge of the subject matter and gained a better understanding” (S10) of each of the five practices of exemplary leaders. Student S137 stated, “I believe I became a much more aware leader. I am now able to understand my actions in a new light and furthermore, understand how those actions will affect those around me.” This understanding led students to change their scores based on information learned in the course content. “When I first took the assessment I may have felt like I was strong in Modeling the Way. After taking this course and obtaining the knowledge of what Modeling the Way truly means, I feel like I still have a lot to improve on and this feeling is reflected in my score” (S61). Students also reflected that after learning the course content, they were more honest or accurate when scoring themselves. “I feel the reason the score did not increase is because when answering the questions the second time, I was more honest with myself” (S80). Student S92 further reflected, “I feel my report did not indicate this change because this time I was more honest with my S-LPI and it shows my leadership practices more accurately.”

Although many students felt their lack of increase was due to a more honest understanding of the five practices, others felt as though the S-LPI assessment itself was not a good measure of their leadership behaviors and “did not properly assess” (S107) them. “My S-LPI score did not report an increase in the practices of Inspiring a Shared Vision and Challenging the Process. However, I do personally feel that I did perform better in these areas, regardless of what the report says” (S19). Some students felt as though the assessment did not capture their changes in leadership behavior. “I feel like I did not show an increase because I could not share how I know I have grown in inspiring a shared vision” (S66).

### **Conclusions/Implications**

It can be concluded from the findings that students believed the course content affected their understanding of the five practices of leadership. Students were able to make “revised interpretation” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 1) of their S-LPI scores as a result of critical reflection and reflective observation (Kolb, 1984) on course content. Students referred to their learning in the course and understanding of the five practices as contributing to a change or lack of change in their scores, a manifestation of understanding and learning according to Mezirow (1998). Along with an understanding of the five practices of leadership, it can be concluded that the course content (namely the service-learning project and small-group, in-class activities) also affected the students’ application or non-application of the five practices of leadership. This study agrees with Posner’s (2012) observations that, “Those student leaders, who saw themselves as most effective in comparison with their peers, consistently reported using each leadership practice more” (p.232). As this study examined changes over the time period of one 15-week semester, some students may not have indicated a change in their S-LPI score because they did not have

enough time and experiences to use the practice.

The findings also indicated that students experienced growth and development as leaders through opportunities to apply leadership behaviors through small-group activities in the classroom (curricular), the service learning growth project (co-curricular and high-impact practice), and extracurricular activities (work experiences and student organizations). This course allowed students to have opportunities to both develop leadership skills and act in leadership roles, which aligned with Posner's (2012) critical components for student leaders. Therefore, it is recommended that formal leadership coursework integrate more opportunities for students to practice their leadership behaviors. Because high-impact practices, like the service-learning project in this course, have been found to increase student learning, engagement, and retention of information (Kuh, 2008), leadership educators should continue to incorporate high-impact practices within courses that link education and development of leadership in students. These high-impact practices do take time to develop, but in this study, they were found to influence students' development of leadership behaviors. If the goal is to increase leadership abilities in people and organizations, then they [students] must be able to practice leadership in order to gain experience (Huber, 2002). Leadership educators should help students connect what they are learning in leadership coursework to co-curricular (including high-impact experiences) and extracurricular activities and look for ways to incorporate high-impact practices within their formal coursework. While some students may see the link in what they are learning in a leadership course to a student organization or work experience, leadership educators should be intentional in helping them to connect the dots.

The findings of this study also indicated that some students' believed their experiences (personal and organizational) did not allow them the opportunity to apply leadership behaviors during the semester. In accordance with Posner's (2012) indication that student engagement dictates leadership behavior use, students indicated they were not able to increase in a certain behavior because they were not engaged in opportunities to practice these behaviors. Students did have at least one experience for which they could apply their leadership behaviors during the semester (high-impact practice of service learning). While students did have this one experience, the reflections revealed that students may not have understood how to apply their leadership behaviors. Students may have been lacking in critical thinking skills regarding their ability to see the opportunity to apply leadership behaviors in this service-learning experience. Leadership educators should place a greater emphasis on critical self-reflection throughout the course and course activities (curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular). Critical self-reflection is a skill, which students can utilize by making new or revised interpretations of meaning to guide understanding, appreciation, and action (Mezirow, 1990). Leadership educators should help facilitate the process of connecting the high-impact practice (service-learning project) to the application of their leadership behaviors. Reflection and educator feedback may also be used to help students process positive and negative feelings and perceptions about leadership.

Additionally, this study found that students' values and strengths dictated where they chose to focus their leadership behaviors. If students did not view a practice as one of their strengths or did not value the practice, they noted this as a reason why they did not score high on the practice. One of the teaching points within this personal leadership education course encouraged students to focus on using their strengths rather than improving their weaknesses.

The findings indicate this concept may have influenced the focus of some students' practice of leadership during the semester. Therefore, it is recommended that leadership educators involve students in discussion about differences between leadership assessments and the implications of only engaging in behaviors that they consider their strengths. Discussion has been considered signature leadership pedagogy and can provide a medium for students to communicate their thoughts and facilitate their knowledge and understanding of leadership and their development of leadership behaviors (Jenkins, 2012). It would be beneficial for students to have the opportunity to discuss the lessons they learned from this course in order to synthesize the information and apply it to their understanding and application of leadership behaviors.

It should be noted that in Kouzes and Posner's (2008) conceptualization of the five practices, all practices are considered exemplary and fundamental for leaders to be effective. Leadership educators should make sure this is communicated to students. Even though students may be stronger in some practices, no practice should be disregarded if they are to be effective leaders and set out to achieve extraordinary results. However, it should be noted that the context of exercising these leadership behaviors is a factor when achieving results. Not every leadership behavior can be exercised in every context. Students need to understand that different situations lend themselves to different leadership behaviors. While no one behavior is more important than another, certain situations may call for one behavior over another.

Though students were not prompted to only discuss factors related to the course (see reflection prompt in methods section), the analysis of reflections revealed students did primarily focus their reflections on components of the course which influenced their change in score for leadership behaviors. Findings from this study are not an implication that the course experience was the sole determinant of the change in students' scores on the S-LPI instrument. However, based on the results of this study, the formal leadership course appeared to facilitate their change in score for their leadership behaviors whether it was through the in-class activities, the co-curricular service project for the course (high-impact experience), or the extracurricular activities they experienced during that semester.

### **Recommendations for Research**

This study used a qualitative, content analysis to assess the impact of a leadership course on students' perceptions of how their leadership behaviors were developed. Future studies should incorporate quantitative designs to determine if significant differences in changes in leadership behaviors occurred over a 15-week semester leadership course.

This study examined student perceptions of why their scores changed during a leadership course. Perceptions were interpreted using students' reflections of what they experienced throughout the course. Leadership educators should use reflection to facilitate students' understanding of leadership and to assist them in identifying specific leadership behaviors they have developed. As noted by Roberts (2008), students' ability to reflect will be crucial to their success. Learning to think for oneself is part of critical self-reflection. Leadership educators should continue to investigate the significance of self-reflective practice and how it can be used to facilitate learning for multiple purposes (Mezirow, 1998). Future studies should incorporate measures to identify components of reflective practice and critical self-reflection, which best

facilitate students' ability to develop leadership behaviors.

This study employed a content analysis methodology. Because of this, we were unable to ask follow-up questions to the students after they submitted their course post-reflections. Future studies could build upon this study through employing a methodology which allows the educator/researcher to assess the student responses and have the ability to ask pertinent follow up questions.

Finally, future studies should address the influence of curricular, co-curricular, and extra-curricular activities on students' development specifically for each of the five exemplary leadership practices. Research on how certain educational practices influence the development of each of the five practices could benefit leadership educators as they make choices on which educational practices or pedagogies to include in their leadership courses.

## References

- Andenoro, A. C., Allen, S. J., Haber-Curran, P., Jenkins, D. M., Sowcik, M., Dugan, J. P., & Osteen, L. (2013). *National Leadership Education research agenda 2013-2018: Providing strategic direction for the field of leadership education*. Retrieved from Association of Leadership Educators website: <http://leadershipeducators.org/ResearchAgenda>.
- Brungardt, C. (1997). The making of leaders: A review of the research in leadership development and education. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 3(3), 81-95. doi: 10.1177/107179199700300309
- Bryman, A. (2012). *Social research methods* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press Inc.
- Cress, C. M., Astin, H. S., Zimmerman-Oster, K., & Burkhardt, J. C. (2001). Developmental outcomes of college students' involvement in leadership activities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 42(1), 1-27.
- Dugan, J. (2006). Involvement and leadership: A descriptive analysis of socially responsible leadership. *Journal of College Student Development*, 47(3), 335-343. doi: 10.1353/csd.2006.0028
- Erlandson, D. A., Harris, E. L., Skipper, B. L., & Allen, S. D. (1993). *Doing naturalistic inquiry: A guide to methods*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Fraenkel, J. R., Wallen N. E., & Hyun H. H. (2012). *How to design and evaluate research in education* (8th ed.). New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.

- Grandzol, C. J. (2011). An exploratory study of the role of task dependence on team captains' leadership development. *Journal of Leadership Education, 10*, 57-70.
- Huber, N. S. (2002). Approaching leadership education in the new millennium. *Journal of Leadership Education, 1*(1), 25-34.
- Jenkins, D. M. (2012). Exploring signature pedagogies in undergraduate leadership education. *Journal of Leadership Education, 11*(1), 1-27.
- John Wiley & Sons, Inc. (2014). LPI: Leadership Practices Inventory [Online instrument]. Retrieved from <http://www.pfeiffer.com/WileyCDA/Section/id-811878.html>
- Jones, S., & Brown, L. (1993). Alternative views on defining critical thinking through the nursing process. *Holistic Nurse Practitioner, 7*(3), 71-76.
- Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kolb, A. Y., & Kolb, D. A. (2005). Learning styles and learning spaces: Enhancing experiential learning in higher education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education, 4*(2). 193-212.
- Komives, S. R., Lucas, N., & McMahon, T. R. (2013). *Exploring leadership: For college students who want to make a difference* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (1987). *The leadership challenge: How to keep getting extraordinary things done in organizations*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kouzes, J., & Posner, B. (2008). *The student leadership challenge: Five practices for exemplary leaders*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Kuh, G. D. (2008). *High-impact educational practices: What they are, who has access to them, and why they matter*. Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lizzio, A., & Wilson, K. (2007). Developing critical professional judgment: The efficacy of a self-managed reflective process. *Studies in Continuing Education, 29*(3), 277-293.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (1990). *Fostering critical reflection in adulthood: A guide to transformative and emancipatory learning*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

- Mezirow, J. (1998). On critical reflection. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(3), 185-198.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Posner, B. Z. (2004). A leadership development instrument for students: Updated. *Journal of College Student Development*, 45, 443-456.
- Posner, B. Z. (2012). Effectively measuring student leadership. *Administrative Sciences*, 2, 221-234. doi: 10.3390/admsci2040221.
- Roberts, C. (2008). Developing future leaders: The role of reflection in the classroom. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 7(1), 116-130.
- Sessa, V. I., Matos, C., & Hopkins, C. A. (2009). Evaluating a college leadership course: What do students learn in a leadership course with a service-learning component and how deeply do they learn it? *Journal of Leadership Education*, 7(3), 167-192.
- Wren, J. T. (2001). *Instructor's manual to accompany the leader's companion: Insights on leadership through the ages*. University of Richmond: Author.

### **Author Biographies**

Michael Burbank is an undergraduate student earning a degree in University Studies-Leadership. He will be pursuing a master's degree in leadership after graduation. Michael's career goals include working in some type of organization that allows him to motivate people to maximize the use of their unique gifts and talents.

Summer F. Odom is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Agricultural Leadership, Education, & Communications (ALEC) at Texas A&M University. She teaches courses in personal and professional leadership. Dr. Odom received her Ph.D. in Human Resource Development in May 2011. Some of her research interests include programmatic assessment and evaluation of leadership programs and the psychological development of leaders, followers, and learners.

M'Randa Sandlin is an Assistant Researcher at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in the College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources. Dr. Sandlin received her Ph.D. in Agricultural Leadership, Education, and Communications from Texas A&M University where she also taught courses in personal and professional leadership at the collegiate level. Her research interests include programmatic assessment and evaluation of leadership programs and international leadership development.