

A Multifaceted Approach to Leadership Education: CUNY's Institute for Virtual Enterprise

Anthony Borgese
Assistant Professor, Assistant Director of IVE
Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York
Brooklyn, New York
professorborgese@aol.com

Dr. Jonathan Deutsch
Assistant Professor, Assistant Director of IVE
Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York
Brooklyn, New York
jdeutsch@kingsborough.edu

Christoph Winkler
Lecturer, Director of IVELP
Kingsborough Community College, City University of New York
Brooklyn, New York
cwinkler@kingsborough.edu

Abstract

Leadership education is offered in a variety of options at numerous colleges and universities: freestanding courses, seminars or within a program, case studies, on-line instruction, and umbrella leadership courses within various majors. This paper is about the Leadership Program at the City University of New York (CUNY). The Institute for Virtual Enterprise (IVE) is a CUNY Special Initiative charged with implementing a broad leadership program for the diverse student body found within all 17 CUNY campuses. IVE instituted a multifaceted approach to leadership education with an emphasis on having students apply their newfound leadership skills in the real world. This paper discusses the underlying theory, the curriculum design, and the events that occurred during the first run of the leadership program in 2003. It does not advocate for a particular best practice, but merely relates what worked best for the diverse student body of CUNY.

Introduction

The age-old question remains: "Are leaders born or can they be made?" Educators have varied ideas about whether or not leadership can be taught. As educators, we know we cannot guarantee that we can make a leader, but we can give students who study leadership the skill sets and tools that successful leaders use every day. There are many different ways to approach leadership education. Some

universities have complete leadership curricula while others have seminars (Notre Dame). Some universities offer leadership courses within a program (NYU) whereas others offer a leadership “umbrella” course where all students are invited to apply leadership skills to what they have learned throughout their specialized course of study (CUNY). Finally, some universities offer leadership via the case study method, and even some are bold enough to offer leadership education via online instruction (Harvard). This paper does not argue for a best practice in leadership education, but rather looks at the program instituted at the City University of New York (CUNY) by the Institute for Virtual Enterprise (IVE).

The Institute for Virtual Enterprise is a CUNY Special Initiative (IVE) (refer to www.ive.cuny.edu). IVE was adopted in May 2002 as a way to spur applied learning teaching methodologies throughout the CUNY system. IVE primarily started as a way to provide business and entrepreneurial skills to CUNY students in the global marketplace known as Virtual Enterprise. However, the core product of what IVE offers is applied learning techniques for a variety of academic disciplines. In February of 2003, IVE created its first leadership program, the Institute for Virtual Enterprise Leadership Program (IVELP). This was no easy task as the students at CUNY are highly diversified as well as geographically disbursed over 17 CUNY campuses. How could anyone create a program that was intensive enough for students to feel that it was worthwhile, asynchronous enough to allow for students to do their work at anyplace, anytime, palatable for a variety of various academic disciplines, research and writing intensive to satisfy Writing Across the Curriculum mandates, provide case studies for real-life scenarios, and available online to maximize student participation? And, there had to be an applied practice component for all students, because we believe, as did Dewey, that educating students should have an applied, experiential piece attached to academic learning in order for students to be successful.

Course Design

Many educators and industry leaders believe that leadership education should focus on teaching an array of various skills (Heifetz & Sinder, 1991). We designed the IVELP to adhere to four approaches of leadership education: trait, situational, contingency, and transactional. Trait theory suggests that leaders are born and have leadership qualities that are inherited, such as extrovertedness and being decisive (Stratton, 2002). The situational approach suggests that leadership style is based on the needs of followers (Robbins & Langton, 2000). The contingency approach suggests that the interaction of leaders, followers, and the situation determines which leadership style to use (Fiedler, 1971). Finally, the transactional approach is a social exchange between the leader and the expectations of followers (Heifetz & Sinder, 1991).

Blackboard.com

Since we were developing a blended learning program, and CUNY has a variety of students dispersed throughout the New York area, we needed an online component that would allow students to keep up with the stringent demands of the program. To fulfill our needs for an asynchronous course and online availability for students, we secured server space at CUNY Headquarters and offered the course to all CUNY students via Blackboard.com. Blackboard is an instructional platform that allows students to access and submit their work asynchronously. Students were required to sign onto Blackboard for a minimum of five hours per week. When students accessed the site, they were required to do the following: (a) read a book of a well-know leader, (b) participate in discussion board topics, (c) write reaction papers based on what they learned, and (d) find a leadership related case study that conformed to their discipline. Since all CUNY students were given the opportunity to participate in the program, we had students from social, economic, business, and political areas as well as a variety of other interests.

By assigning students to read about a leader, we addressed the situational component. Students were able to read for themselves how a particular leader acted in meeting real challenges. Students learned from their readings and gauged for themselves how their chosen leaders acted and related those actions using “virtual classrooms” (VCs). VCs are another aspect of Blackboard that allowed students to “come together”, online, synchronously to discuss their leaders and the leadership topics we assigned as part of the course. The VC has also provided direct access to professors and allowed students to discuss problems they were having with the coursework. Thus, enabling further clarification they required about leadership topics.

The weekly reaction papers were implemented to fulfill Writing Across the Curriculum mandates that CUNY had instituted a year earlier. Writing Across the Curriculum requires instructors to add writing components into their courses. Students had to write about leadership topics posted to the Blackboard web site. This requirement addressed the contingency component because students evaluated their own leaders and were able to discuss whether their leaders acted appropriately. Students actively traded ideas through their interactions. They were able to learn from each other as well as from their chosen leader. Additionally, the trait approach theory was incorporated because students discussed whether they thought their leaders were, in fact, born with their leadership skills or gained them through circumstance.

Finally, students were required to find and post a leadership case study to the Blackboard web site. The reason for this was twofold: (1) to give students the different perspectives of leadership styles, and (2) to increase their research skills. Since students were from various disciplines, their leaders acted differently from each other. For example, students recognized that a social leader would probably not act the same way a business leader would. This is what we hoped students

would learn. All of these Blackboard components allowed us to design the application piece of the course with greater ease.

Applied Leadership Components

Students received leadership theories, tactics, traits, topics, social exchange, skills, and situations through the Blackboard component of the course. We then devised the application part of the course. Students were to complete the following: (a) a roundtable discussion about leadership, (b) identify a real-world problem that required leadership to solve, (c) a leadership conference, and (d) a summer incubator wherein they would implement their leadership skills on the problem they identified.

The leadership roundtable discussion allowed students to meet each other and their instructors for the first time, face-to-face. Putting a face to a name was vital for completing the rest of the course and this was the ideal time and place to do it. Next, the roundtable discussion enhanced student's ability to communicate their ideas more clearly. A good leader is able to communicate effectively and the roundtable discussion allowed students to discuss their leaders and trade leadership theories and topics with each other. Finally, by participating in the roundtable discussion students gained critical thinking and interpersonal skills. Students formulated whether the leadership theories and tactics used by Bill Gates were the same as the ones used by Kofi Anan. Students were ultimately able to discuss the different styles of effective leadership.

The leadership conference was the most difficult piece to arrange because it required help from outside industry leaders. We wanted to assemble as many leaders as we could from the various disciplines represented by our students. We managed to gather Hays Steilberg, the Director of Executive Development for Bertlesmann North America, Mr. Theodore Kheel, the noted labor attorney who is the Director of the Carriage House, a non-profit organization concerned with environmental issues, and Mr. Neil Kleinman, the Director of The Center for an Urban Future.

The first half of the leadership conference enabled students to hear from these leaders firsthand about how they approached the topic of leadership. This is the basis of Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Students were able to hear how these leaders used their leadership skills throughout their careers. By learning how these leaders acted, students were able to learn effective leadership skills. In the second half of the conference, students articulated what they learned in the IVELP. Students presented their papers to the leaders in attendance and devised plans to solve their problems using the leadership skills they acquired through the IVELP. Some of the topics included: social, environmental, political, educational, and business issues. It was at this point that students displayed some of the characteristics of true leaders. Students were able to: communicate their vision and ideas, listen actively, provide constructive feedback, build relationships with

peers and subordinates, set goals, negotiate, solve problems, enhance their creativity, and use their analytical skills. Some of the students may have possessed these skills before the course even started, but we believe that based on pre- and post- observations of students, they all gained leadership experience through the program.

The final part of the program was the summer incubator. The summer incubator allowed students to put their ideas into actual practice. Students were given a small stipend to set their projects in motion. Remaining students met on a monthly basis to update their progress and provide insight to other students who may have been having problems. Some of the results include a culinary program for underprivileged children, a bookstore in an underserved area, help for the homeless, an online distribution system for Ugandan farmers, and minor educational and political reforms in certain areas. This was truly an indication that the leadership program worked.

A Brief Statistical Overview

Although this paper is a program design essay, we felt it was necessary to give a brief overview of student participant statistics. Due to the stringent demands of the course, we did not expect a huge turnout of students interested in participating in the IVELP. These students were taking full course loads at their respective institutions and the IVELP was not a credit-bearing course. Our first gathering was on a very snowy February morning. To our surprise, approximately 60 students from CUNY's 16 campuses showed up to hear about the program. We were able to sign up 43 students to participate in the online component. Of the 43, 32 students participated in some way in the online portion of the course, but because of their heavy course load, only a small student cohort completed all program requirements.

Interestingly, we had some students who asked to participate in as many activities as they could, knowing they would not be eligible for the summer incubator stipend. That meant there were varied amounts of students participating in the case study, roundtable, conference and leadership day respectively. Finally, we had eight students complete the course in its entirety. All eight of those students implemented their leadership projects in some way, shape or form.

Conclusion

Leadership education programs are abundant. They exist in many colleges and universities throughout the world. Many pedagogies and curriculum designs embrace leadership education in some form. The administrators of the Institute for Virtual Enterprise, a City University of New York Special Initiative, have designed a multifaceted approach to leadership education. Using case studies, roundtable discussions, a conference, and a full day dedicated to honing

leadership skills, we believe we have found the right mix to engage students and mold the future leaders of tomorrow.

Of course, no curriculum design is perfect. We have taken into consideration the feedback from all student participants, educators, and private sector partners. In the second iteration of the IVELP in 2004, students worked together in teams and worked on a specific problem within their communities. This adjustment built teamwork skills and allowed students to feed off each other even more than they did in the first run of the program. Additionally, more enhancements have been made, including the awarding of elective credits for students throughout CUNY, and assigning specific leadership mentors to individual students. For more information about the IVELP, or to follow its progress, go to www.ive.cuny.edu.

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