First-Year Student Perceptions Related to Leadership Awareness and Influences

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Abstract

This study sought to explore first-year college student perceptions related to when they first became aware of leadership and perceived influences on leadership. The study was rooted in the Leadership Identity Development Model (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005). Five purposively selected individuals completing the first semester of a formal leadership program for first-year students participated in this study. Content analysis of qualitative interviews revealed two themes related to leadership awareness: pre-college and positional versus non-positional roles; four themes related to perceived leadership influences: external role models, internal beliefs, previous experience, and types of leadership/leadership philosophy. This research supports the importance of both internal and external factors in developing an understanding of what leadership is by first-year college students.

Introduction

Institutional mission statements in higher education often state that developing leaders is a primary outcome of the college experience. Scholars believe that institutional missions will continue to highlight leadership as a key goal or outcome of the college experience (Astin & Astin, 2000; Boatman, 1999; McIntire, 1989). Therefore, student affairs administrators and leadership educators must continue to take this subject seriously and continue to research efforts that develop college student leadership capacities.

Identifying the most successful ways to develop leadership capacities in college students is an ever evolving discussion among leadership educators. Roberts (2007) shared that multiple purposes, strategies, and populations need to be considered when developing leadership programs in order to create dynamic opportunities that meet the needs of a wide array of students. Various developmental techniques can enhance the student leadership experience. For example, create meaningful participatory experiences, examine current programs in light of multiple theories, and create opportunities for students to observe leaders as potential role models (Wagner, 2011). Knowing that leadership is interpreted differently from varying lenses and there is no overarching definition of leadership, one can see that leadership programs look different depending on numerous factors (Bass, 1990; Brungardt, 1996; Dugan, 2011). Thus, they are difficult to compare and measure against one another. However, through student leadership research, scholars have identified factors that have a high impact on student learning; for example, faculty mentoring, sociocultural discussions, community service, involvement, and formal leadership programs can typically promote the achievement of outcomes in leadership education (Dugan, 2011).

According to Dugan (2011), "formal leadership programs are intentionally designed learning opportunities focused on increasing college students' leadership knowledge, skills, and values through an overarching set of experiences spanning multiple platforms of delivery" (p. 75). According to this broad definition, researchers typically report positive outcomes from participating in formal leadership programs (Cress, Astin, Zimmerman, & Burkhardt, 2001; Dugan, 2006; Komives, Longerbeam, Owen, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006). Results are not as straight forward in complex formal leadership programs, due to the difficulty in comparing programs that have inconsistent means of delivery (Dugan, 2011).

Additional research highlights how formal leadership programs assist students in their development as leaders. In the study by Kezar and Moriarty (2000), Caucasian and African American women shared that they believed participation in formal leadership programs assisted in their leadership development. In another study (Cress et al., 2001), three characteristics of quality leadership programs emerged as directly impacting student development: opportunities for service, experiential activities (internships), and active learning through collaboration (group projects in class). Students involved in these programs were more likely to develop a sense of civic responsibility, meaning they learned the importance of participating in their community and helping others. Dugan (2006) shared that leadership programs may have a broader impact if the learning outcomes are focused on areas in which students need to improve upon rather than focused on too many variables. Considering the diversity of research on leadership development, Dugan's broad definition of formal leadership programs was used to inform the study.

Theoretical Framework

Over the years, numerous scholars have designed leadership theories and models that have been applied in the context of formal leadership programs (Bass, 1990; Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2007; Komives, Wagner, & Associates, 2009; Northouse, 2007; Roberts, 2007). The theoretical framework for this study was grounded in the Leadership Identity Development (LID) Model, which was nonexistent until 2005. Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, and Osteen (2005) developed the LID Model to help understand stages of leadership development which students experience throughout their life. The LID is based on relational leadership as depicted by the Relational Leadership Model (RLM).

According to the LID model, when a student progresses through stages of development the individual cultivates a deeper understanding of leadership, community, and self in relation to the world. A grounded theory approach

revealed a six stage process through which includes the following: awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identified, leadership differentiated, generativity, and internalization/synthesis. The awareness stage recognizes that leaders exist and students are inactive followers. Exploration and engagement result in students becoming involved and active followers. Students in the leader identified stage understand that leadership is positional. The generativity stage results in an active commitment to a larger purpose. Students in this stage began to invest in others and focus on sustaining their organization. The internalization and synthesis stage meant vigorous commitment and involvement with leadership as a daily course of action (Komives et al., 2005). The model explores how students visualize leadership identity as it relates to the relational leadership model. In addition to the stages mentioned above, group and developmental influences were essential in understanding how the individual changes across the stages of a central category. These influences included adult influences, peer influences, meaningful involvement, and reflective learning (Komives et al., 2007).

The LID model helps one to identify stages of development and see his or her leadership growth over time (Komives et al., 2005, Komives et al., 2006). The model does have limitations. Students in the grounded theory held extensive organizational involvements on their campuses; thus, the data may appear differently with other types of students. Even though there are limitations, this model can serve as a beneficial aid in understanding the leadership development of students.

Student development theory confirms that programs whose audience is in the same developmental stage are successful in the fact that they provide opportunities for community building, individual, and shared growth (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). Day, Harrison, and Haplin (2009) believe that there are numerous reasons why identity development should be incorporated in leader development. As the authors noted, "identity is important typically because it grounds individuals in understanding who they are, what are their major goals and aspirations, and what are their personal strengths and challenges" (Day et al., 2009, p. 64).

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study, conducted as part of a larger study, was to explore perceptions of first-year college students related to their awareness of leadership and perceived leadership influences. More specifically, this study sought to create meaning and understanding of the perceptions of participants in the inaugural cohort of a leadership development program for first-year students about the awareness stage of the LID model in order to glean insight into how practitioners

may structure formal leadership programs. Understanding a student's pre-college experiences prior to entering college will assist leadership educators when designing formal leadership programs in order to meet the students where they are at in their own development. This study was guided by the following research questions:

- How do students describe the first time they became aware of being involved in leadership?

- What factors do students believe influenced their leadership?

Methodology

The formal leadership program included in the present study was intended for first-year, traditional aged, undergraduate students who are interested in enhancing their understanding of leadership and expanding their experiences. The purpose of the program was to provide undergraduate students at a Research I land-grant university the opportunity to engage in conversations and activities that will introduce them to leadership essentials, assist them in articulating their personal philosophy of leadership, and empower them to be aware, mindful and active leaders. This leadership development program was designed to address and support the needs of students as they grow throughout their career at the university and become more involved in local, national and global communities. With those concepts in mind, the guiding principles of the program were as follows: everyone has the capacity to lead, leadership is multifaceted, leadership is collaborative, leadership is a process, leadership strives to create positive change, and leadership strives to reach shared goals. The root of these guiding principles is for participants to focus on their own personal identity development.

This study utilized a basic qualitative research approach (Merriam, 2009). Five participants in the previously described leadership program participated in this study. Participants were purposively selected by a member of the research team based on varying levels of leadership identity development. Specifically, two men and three women participated in face-to-face semi-structured interviews (Kvale, 1996) conducted to gain an understanding of the perceptions of program participants related to leadership identity development. Komives, Longerbeam, Mainella, Osteen, Owen and Wagner (2009) noted that "student interviews are exceptionally useful sources of data" (p. 28) when conducting qualitative leadership identity development studies.

Each semi-structured interview lasted one hour. An interview guide was used during the interviews to help facilitate the sequence of topics addressed during the

interview (Kvale, 1996). The guide was adapted from interview questions developed and used by Komives et al. (2005). To ensure confidentiality, each participant was randomly assigned a pseudonym. The interviews were recorded on audio tapes. Following the completion of all interviews, the audio tapes were transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Member checking was accomplished by requesting that participants review the interview transcripts and respond with any changes or additions. A peer debriefing was held with the entire research team prior to data analysis (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Data were analyzed using inductive content analysis. "Content analysis is a technique that enables researchers to study human behavior in an inductive way through an analysis of their communications" (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2009, p. 472). According to Patton (2002), "content analysis, then, involves identifying, coding, categorizing, classifying, and labeling the primary patterns in the data" (p. 463). Data were coded using the three-phase coding process outlined by Glaser and Strauss (1967). In the first phase, the data were read and open codes were created. In the second phase, axial codes were assigned. Connections were made between the open codes to create categories. The units of data were reviewed again during this phase to ensure that the connections made with category codes still accurately represented the data. In the third phase, selective coding, categories were identified as those that repeated frequently and accounted for most of the data. These codes emerged as the major themes gleaned from the interviews.

Trustworthiness was established in this study through, member checks, peer debriefings, and triangulation. Archival data, including applications completed by students to be selected for the program, and answers to reflection questions collected from weekly program sessions were used to triangulate the data collected in the interviews.

Findings

Research question one examined how students described the first time they became aware of being involved in leadership. Content analysis of the interview transcripts revealed two themes that emerged from this question: pre-college and positional versus non-positional roles.

Pre-College

Pre-college experiences that influenced awareness of leadership were evident in the statements shared by the students. Students referenced elementary (Sarah, John), middle (Molly), and high school (Kate, Ben) experiences that were influential in their leadership awareness. Sarah reported first being aware of

leadership in the fourth grade while John remembers it from as far back as when he was "about to get promoted to be a Webelo" in Boy Scouts.

Other students did not describe becoming aware of leadership until high school. Kate referred to her actually being in a leadership position within an organization in high school as the first time she really became aware of leadership. Similarly, another student said:

> I guess the first time that I actually put label leadership on it was probably in high school, when my school started the Leadership program that they have…And they have a class, and you learn about leadership, and they were in groups, and we do leadership service projects and stuff like that. So that's probably the first time that I ever associated leadership with anything that I did. (Ben)

Positional versus Non-Positional

Positional versus non-positional leadership roles were also identified in the statements that the students shared. Again, some students clearly associated leadership with positions within organizations. For example, one student stated:

> I was first involved in Student Council and that was like my first taste of leadership, and it was like the whole process of running and getting elected by peers and that was like… I was elected and that made me a leader to them. (Molly)

Similarly, as noted in the pre-college section, Kate described becoming aware of leadership when she was actually in a leadership position within the DECA organization. John was also able to recognize non-positional leadership roles:

> I had no idea what to do but on television that night there was a movie called Gandhi on. I saw that and I was all pumped up and inspired by this guy who like made social change and what not and my dad explained just how much that meant to our culture and our background, so I'm like okay I've got to do something with Gandhi in it and I didn't know where to start but what ended up happening I saw just a small thing where I did a fundraiser and I funded for to sell books to go to India less fortunate schools and it worked out pretty well. We continued to it until out of the area but you know the leadership portion was that my dad refused to do anything with it. (John)

Within the quote above, John clearly articulated a component of the Awareness stage of the LID model by describing when he first recognized the ability of

others to lead and influence those around them. Another student was also able to describe being a leader as more relational, rather than positional manner from an early age as she described an experience from when she was in the fourth grade. According to her:

> We, as a class, we went to a first grade classroom and helped, we were each paired up with a first grade student and we would help them with their reading and writing and spelling stuff like that, for like a half hour each week, I think it was. I think that was the first time that I really felt like I was a leader just working one on one with the student, helping them to learn. (Sarah)

Findings showed that first-year students in this program came into the program with at least an understanding of leadership from a positional perspective. In other words, they were perhaps most aware of leadership because they had served in what they defined as a leadership position.

While two themes emerged from the research question related to when participants first became aware of leadership, it is evident the two are interrelated. While all participants were aware of leadership prior to coming to college, when they first recall being aware of leadership was different for each participant. It appeared as though school and outside activities at various times in their lives played a role in triggering their awareness of leadership. Furthermore, it was because of some of these activities and experiences that participants became aware of leadership as being either positional or non-positional.

The second research question explored factors influencing the leadership of participants. Four themes emerged from the content analysis of the interview transcripts: external role models, previous experience, internal beliefs, and types of leadership/leadership philosophy.

External Role Models

Students noted the impact of external role models, such as teachers and other family members, on their conceptualization of leadership. Many of the participants shared something related to the influence an older adult. John referenced the presence of an adult family friend as an influence by stating, "I would see my dad's best friend was a lawyer and I would really looked up to him." Other students described the influence of an older adult more in depth. One student noted the influence of her parents and teachers as an influence to how she first started to think about leadership. She commented:
> I think that came from watching my teachers in the classroom, as well as my parents just doing their job….They worked at [University] and so I

would often be with them at night programs or on the weekends when they were here, and I would watch them lead students and other faculty. (Sarah)

The external roles models identified were not always significantly older. One student noted the influence of a sibling. She shared:

I have a brother like he has really been an influence because he's like the first person that like I really looked up to and saw him develop as a leader because we were both in the same [organization]. He was in it a couple of years before me of course, and I was able to see him grow and I was able to like kind of look at that and see how to better develop my leadership skills. (Molly)

It was evident that students were able to identify role models who had either directly or indirectly influenced their leadership.

Previous Experience

When discussing their previous experiences, students stated experiences involving coordinating events and holding a position. For example:

I definitely learned more about taking action and like actually being responsible for myself and my own actions and kind of like organize my own program, and get it set up and completed. Like I set up my own [event]. (Molly)

In addition, Ben stated:

Because I was a senior, I got to lead over all the freshmen, sophomore and juniors who were in the class with me. And then also my basketball coach is kind like, or was for a while, like the chaplain of our school. So he takes all the grads or at least the middle school grads on little retreats and he asked me to be a senior leader of the eighth grade retreat. I got to do that and that was I guess that was one of the first times that I was actually like put in charge of a little group, so I had like thirteen eighth graders that I was in charge of and there's like five other senior leaders with me so it was cool. It was like the first time I was actually like a counselor of students and stuff like that, like by myself and not with another adult. (Ben)

Students who shared the most about previous experience tied such experiences to positional views of leadership. In essence, these students needed the opportunity to be directly involved with leadership as they considered what had the most influence over their leadership.

Internal Beliefs

Students shared work ethic, morals and values, ethics and religion as factors that influenced their leadership. Participants described how these factors act as a guide for how they make decisions. Molly focused on work ethic being a driving influence and stated, "I like to get things done and I will not rest until like things are done and so that like affects my leadership, because I'm just like very proactive." Another student focused on how morals and values influenced her leadership:

> I guess my morals and my values… really influence my leadership. Like I'm not going to do anything or I'm not going to tell people to do anything that goes against them. That's just something like I'm so like strict in those, like I won't change anything and so then like I don't know, I just have like this desire to make sure that everything goes like we said. (Kate)

One student connected morals and values to religion. Specifically, Ben shared the he "definitely have those morals and standards and there's a lot of leadership example in Christianity." He went on to describe the influence of his religion and shared:

> I think it helps me in the long run make better decisions about what I want to do and about how I want to treat situations that I guess I could possible get into, so it gives me a basis for making decisions, stuff like that. So it helps in that area. I guess I mean it gives me an overall reason to be a leader, because I don't know, if I didn't have my faith and my religion to believe in. I don't think I would necessarily have as much of a purpose to be an active leader in life so to put it generally like that. (Ben)

Another student also focused heavily on how religion had been a major influence on leadership. She noted:

> My faith, my religion, I'm Catholic and like mostly it's based on my Catholic principles and stuff. I mean and just kind of like life, and what my mom has taught me, my conscience, you know… sometimes something will happen and I'll be like oh, I don't like that, we're not going to do that again. (Kate)

Overall, the students' belief systems played a critical role in how they viewed not only themselves, but leadership as well.

Types of Leadership/Leadership Philosophy

How participants viewed, and in essence framed their view of leadership, also influenced their personal leadership. Three types of leadership emerged from the conversations with students. Some participants clearly identified leadership as being positionally focused, servant minded, or management-oriented. Sarah shared quotes related to two differing paradigms. First, Sarah found that leadership was positional and stated:

> I think everybody has to work together, but I do believe that there has to be somebody up at the top, and then there down, and then each person is like of a head of their own thing and they all have to work together. (Sarah)

While Sarah shared a positional stance initially, she also found that leadership can be servant minded as well:

> Another thing about me is that I love to watch other people be successful, and so I've found that in leadership I make sure that what I'm doing helps them be successful because then I get satisfaction out of that. (Sarah)

Kate saw leadership as management-oriented and highlighted how she took the lead on a group project, assigned tasks based on skill sets, and gathered all the materials prior to the due date. Kate found satisfaction from this management approach and shared, "That was actually a really good group."

Overall, students seemed to have varying, if not multiple, leadership philosophies. In different situations, these students may view leadership and what has influenced their leadership differently.

When examining the four themes related factors influencing the leadership of participants, it appears as two were internal factors and two were external factors. The beliefs participants had about such factors as work ethic, morals and values, and religion and the views they held related to types of leadership and leadership philosophies were internal factors influencing their leadership. The influence of other individuals and what they learned from previous experiences were external factors influencing their leadership.

Conclusions and Implications

It is clear that the leadership awareness and perceptions of first-year college students is complex. Students in this study identified internal and external factors

that helped shape their views. Additional research is needed to dissect how these pre-college involvements and realities impact students' experience in a formal leadership program. Such research will help practitioners as they develop leadership programs that challenge students to reflect on their past experiences and help them make connections as to how those experiences have the potential to shape their future.

Our primary focus in this study was to investigate the initial stage of the Leadership Identity Development Model. Focusing on the Awareness stage provided insight and several implications for student affairs and leadership education research and practice. First, as researchers and practitioners, it is essential that we facilitate conversations with students about their experiences before college. It is evident that students bring to college their previous experiences that helped shape their current worldview, including views and awareness of leadership (Dugan, 2011). When students enter a formal leadership program, encouraging reflection of their pre-college experiences of leadership can be beneficial. Kolb (1984) discussed reflection of concrete experiences and how that process impacts the learning experience. Knowledge of the four types of experiences and learning styles will not only help students in their leadership development, but in other academic settings. As educators, it is our role to provide a venue for students to explore connections between their leadership experiences within a formal leadership program and their academic experiences in the classroom. For instance, if an overwhelming amount of students identify their early views of leadership as having to hold a position, it would be a pivotal learning moment to challenge students as to why they believe this to be true. This can foster rich discussion that could prompt future conversations as well as encourage students to think critically.

Formal leadership programs should have a solidified curriculum with student learning and development outcomes (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education [CAS], 2009). While reflection of pre-college experiences is not an articulated outcome, reflection aids in a student's "understanding of self" and can help identify why they wanted to be a part of a formal leadership program. Understanding the reasons behind active student participation can impact investment and retention.

Just as Dugan (2011) stated, "educators should first begin with critical self-reflection regarding their developmental preparedness" (p. 78), educators also need to challenge students to self-reflect on their experiences prior to entering the leadership program as to gauge their preparedness of actively contributing to the program. Self-reflection of pre-college experiences can be a powerful tool in helping students and educators gain momentum in creating healthy discourse around leadership.

Second, students' discussion of internal beliefs as depicted in Question 2 indicates the need for continued integration of personal development within formal leadership programs. Some elements of personal development represented in Question 2, such as morals, values, spiritual development and ethics, are foundational components reflected in vital student affairs literature, such as *Learning Reconsidered* (NASPA/ACPA, 2004) and CAS (2009), as well as significant leadership models, such as the Social Change Model and the Relational Leadership Model (Komives et al., 2007; Komives, Wagner, et al., 2009). Student's awareness and growth in these areas are connected to their awareness and growth in leadership, and some might say development in one area is essential for development in the other. Komives et al. (2011) shared several examples of activities, discussion topics, course material, and suggested readings that centers around personal development of students within a leadership program, thus reinforcing the concept that personal and leadership development are integrated.

Finally, further discussion of the role others play in student's leadership journey is also needed. Komives et. al. (2005) stated "adults were very important in building confidence and being an early building block of support" (p. 596). Students in this study indicate family members, family friends, and a coach as individuals who have influenced their awareness of leadership. Encouraging students to continue to reflect on external relationships that have an influence on their views of leadership can be valuable, specifically in creating supportive mentoring relationships throughout their academic career. These discussions could foster their view of self with others from dependent to interdependent.

It is recommended that research efforts continue to explore first-year college students' awareness of leadership and perceived leadership influences. In order to more fully understand the leadership identity development of a diverse student population, future studies should include a larger number of students with more diverse backgrounds and experiences. Through this study, it is evident that some college students' perceptions of leadership are shaped from their experiences with individuals affiliated with their high school education. It is a recommendation that leadership educators form stronger relationships with high school personnel who have direct, co-curricular relationships with students in an effort to better understand the high school experience. Gaining a better perspective of the pre-college experiences of first year students from an administrator point of view could strengthen the design, structure and success of formal leadership programs. Finally, while focusing on just one stage of the LID model provided the opportunity to explore student's perceptions at a deeper level, it is recommended that future research incorporate all stages.

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