

Leadership Identity Development through an Interdisciplinary Leadership Minor

Tyson J. Sorensen

Assistant Professor, Utah State University
2300 Old Main Hill
Logan, UT 84322

Aaron J. McKim

Graduate Student, Oregon State University
112 Strand Agriculture Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331

Jonathan J. Velez

Associate Professor, Oregon State University
112 Strand Agriculture Hall
Corvallis, OR 97331

Abstract

Leadership development among postsecondary students can occur through a variety of experiences; one such experience is a leadership minor. The purpose of this descriptive interpretive study was to analyze students' experiences while enrolled in a leadership minor with a focus on exploring evidence of leadership identity development. By exploring the leadership identity development of students enrolled in a leadership minor, we sought to provide valuable information for professionals within postsecondary leadership education offering, or planning to offer a leadership minor. Our analysis revealed changes in the leadership identity and skill development of students involved in the leadership minor. Implications and recommendations for leadership development programs, specifically leadership minors, are discussed.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Although leadership development is a broad term, it typically involves behaviors in which individuals change their perceived identity as a leader (Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005; Komives, Owen, Longersbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2006; Lord & Hall, 2005). Therefore, effective leadership development programs could be identified as programs that encourage the development of leadership identity among participants. This study sought to examine a leadership development experience at the college level, a leadership minor, by evaluating the development of participants' leadership identity.

In 2005 and 2006, a team led by Susan Komives set out to further understand leadership development by examining changes in leadership identity over time. This work yielded a leadership identity model (Komives et al., 2005; Komives et al., 2006). The leadership identity model expanded the previous understanding of leadership development to include a specific process in which leaders develop. The leadership identity model proposed by Komives et al.

(2005, 2006) was developed using the leadership development reflections of students at the post-secondary level. Komives et al. (2005, 2006) selected this population because students in college had enough life experience to reflect on while still being actively engaged in the development of their own leadership identity.

The leadership identity model proposed by Komives et al. (2005, 2006) outlined six stages of identity development: awareness, exploration/engagement, leader identified, leadership differentiated, generativity, and integration/synthesis (see Figure 1).

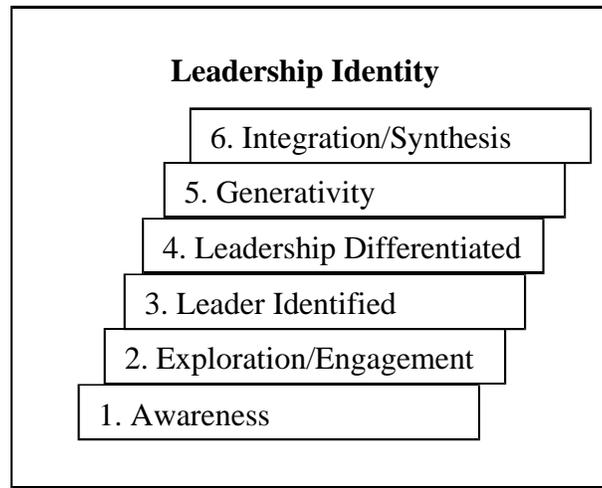


Figure 1. Six stages of leadership identity development (Komives et al., 2005, 2006).

The first stage, awareness, involves students becoming aware that leadership happens in the world. Typically, students in this stage view leaders as historic figures. Furthermore, students in this stage feel completely reliant on the leadership of others. For many students, identifying aspects of their own leadership identity is not realized until it is brought to their attention (Komives et al., 2005). Therefore, education programs that discuss aspects of leadership identity aid in the transition to the second stage. The transition out of the awareness stage begins when an individual starts to realize their potential to be a leader in the future.

In stage two, exploration and engagement, students begin to form peer groups and seek opportunities to explore their interests. Opportunities for students to take on new responsibilities, including leadership, occur during this exploration-based stage. Students' view of leadership in stage two includes recognizing leaders within their daily life, like teachers, ministers, and siblings. The transition out of stage two is typically marked by the recognition of the student's leadership potential by someone else (Komives et al., 2006).

Stage three, leader-identified, is the stage in which the majority of students begin their college career. In the leader-identified stage, students recognize positional leadership and begin moving in and out of leadership roles, exploring what it takes to be a positional leader. As students move through this stage, they start to reduce their involvement in groups, focusing on those groups with greater personal meaning. During stage three, leaders pursue more complex

leadership roles and recognize quality leadership requires all group members to participate in the process of leadership. Reflection and learning are essential as students continue to transition out of stage three. This time of reflection and learning leads the student to consciously practice new ways of being a leader (Komives et al., 2006).

Entering stage four, leadership-differentiated, students begin to view leadership as more than a title. During this stage, students view themselves as community builders within their groups. This new view of leadership forces many students to seek guidance from adults to process their leadership experiences in search of a deeper understanding of leadership. Students also turn to their peers as role models for effective leadership practices.

Students begin to connect their leadership to a larger purpose as they transition into stage five, generativity. As students move through stage five of leadership identity development, their philosophies of leadership begin to take shape, and a stronger commitment to their group develops (Komives et al., 2006). During this phase, students develop a commitment to ideals and purposes that are larger than themselves, and a concern for the welfare and future of their organization, ideals, and purposes develops.

As students transition into the final stage of leadership identity development, integration/synthesis, they begin to align their leadership skills to their future goals. Stage six is characterized by students identifying they have the leadership skills to be effective in a variety of contexts. In addition, stage six is marked with a commitment to life-long development and a confidence to try new leadership experiences. Students integrating leadership into their personal identity is a hallmark of this stage (Komives et al., 2006). The leadership identity model served as the theoretical framework for our research. It is important to note, student progression through the six stages of the leadership identity model is rarely linear; in fact, research by Komives and her team (2005, 2006) suggested a “helix model” in which students continuously return to previous stages as they progress.

In this study we analyzed the reflections of students to identify evidence of progression through the stages of leadership identity development while enrolled in a leadership minor. A leadership minor is designed as a place within the academic curriculum for students to engage in leadership development (Johnson White, 2006). Leadership minors offer students an opportunity to explore leadership theories, develop leadership skills, and further their leadership development through a variety of in-class and out-of-class experiences. In this study, we sought to identify if involvement in a leadership minor could elicit evidence of leadership identity development.

Purpose/Research Questions

As part of a larger qualitative study, this particular study sought to analyze and describe students’ experiences in a leadership minor with the intent to identify and describe changes in leadership identity. To that end, our research question was: How does leadership identity change as a result of students’ experiences in the leadership minor? This research project is intended to address Area I, Priority I of the National Leadership Education Research Agenda to “explore Curriculum Development Frameworks to Enhance the Leadership Education Transfer of Learning” (Andenoro et al., 2013, p. 5).

Methods/Procedures

In this qualitative study, we utilized a descriptive and interpretive research design, which included “description, interpretation, and understanding in the form of recurrent patterns, themes, or categories” (Merriam, 1998, p. 34). According to Creswell (2008) “The focus of qualitative research is on the participants’ perceptions and experiences, and the way they make sense of their lives” (p. 195). Participants in this study shared their experiences and perceptions of the leadership minor through elicitation of written reflections, a student portfolio, a focus group interview, and a questionnaire.

Participants. The leadership minor at Oregon State University was developed with a goal to provide college students with a variety of learning opportunities and experiences for the purpose of leadership education and development. Based on recommendations by the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS), the leadership minor was centered on leadership theory, trait/skill development, and application (Roberts, 1997). Curriculum and student experiences were based around these three areas with an added emphasis on team interactions and a capstone course to facilitate a team-based learning environment.

The participants for this study were purposefully selected undergraduate students enrolled in the final capstone class of the leadership minor during the Spring 2013 term. Participants were selected in order to obtain the most information about experiences and perceptions of the leadership minor. We purposefully selected outspoken, and seemingly influential students, but also less involved, more quiet students. Additionally, we sought to obtain a sample of students whose life experiences as well as leadership minor experiences varied.

The participants represented the first cohort from Oregon State University to graduate with this new degree minor. There were seven students enrolled in the capstone class. All seven students agreed to participate in this study. All but one of the participants in the capstone class had completed all of the requirements for the minor at the time we conducted the study. The participants consisted of six females and one male. We found that seven participants were sufficient for the study as data saturation occurred.

The participants were all given pseudonyms to protect their identities. Since there was only one male student, he was given a female pseudonym so that his comments were not readily identifiable. All participants self-identified as white and ranged from 20 to 29 years old. Four of the seven participants were majoring in the College of Business, two in the College of Science, and one in the College of Public Health and Human Sciences.

Data Collection. Through the investigation and analysis of student portfolios and reflections as well as a written questionnaire, we were able to collect participants’ thoughts and experiences in raw written form. We also captured student reflections through a focus group interview in which reflections were recorded and transcribed into written form. We collected data during the last month of the capstone course when students submitted their final portfolio and reflections and were also asked to complete the questionnaire and participate in the focus group interview.

Focus group interviews. We captured the interpretations of the participants' experiences and perceptions through the transcription and analysis of a semi-structured focus group interview. We used an interview guide protocol that divided the interview into topics with initial wording of broad questions carefully selected as well as a list of topic areas to be explored (Brenner, 2006). The focus group interview consisted of a series of questions that addressed topics about the leadership minor in the areas of leadership training, education and coursework, application and experiences, and programmatic feedback. The interviews were conducted by the two lead researchers of the study. The lead researcher was the moderator and interacted with the students during the interview while the second researcher took notes during the interview.

Student artifacts. The student portfolio consisted of the students' ideas about leadership and their leadership philosophy, information about their capstone project and experiences, an exit reflection about the leadership minor, and future leadership goals. The portfolio project was designed to allow students to share their experiences, goals, and what they learned from their time in the leadership minor.

Questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of three close-ended questions and three open-ended questions. Two questions were demographic in nature, three related to the value and importance of the leadership minor for the students, and one related to career goals. Students completed the questionnaire during the last week of the capstone course.

Research Quality. This study followed the eight overarching criteria for research quality suggested by Tracy (2010) for "excellent qualitative work" (p. 837). Tracy (2010) suggested "Quality qualitative research is marked by worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaningful coherence" (p. 839). Throughout the research process and this narrative, we have attempted to address these quality characteristics.

To insure sincerity and transparency, we acknowledged and were sensitive to the inclinations of researcher biases and tried to provide thorough accounts of the methods employed. In order to identify how our personal experiences, feelings, and beliefs may affect our research and to provide readers with a lens through which to consider the study's credibility, it is important that we share our views, backgrounds, and a statement recognizing subjectivity (Merriam, 1998). Our epistemological views are constructivist in nature. We are all currently employed in teacher education in a field of youth leadership development. Two researchers have conducted research on the topic of leadership. One researcher was very familiar with the participants as the director of the leadership minor and instructor of the capstone course. This researcher was not involved in the focus group interview. One researcher had interacted minimally with the students in the leadership minor through his role as a guest speaker on various occasions. We acknowledge these experiences and views may have influenced how we interacted with and analyzed the data.

Credibility was sought through triangulation and member reflections on our interpretations of the data. Data triangulation was achieved through careful analysis of students' written reflections, student questionnaires, and a focus group interview. We also utilized constant comparisons of interview data and field notes to ensure congruence among all researchers. To further enhance credibility, we presented the data and analysis thereof to participants to allow for

member checks. We provided the transcripts of the focus group interview and a draft of the analysis to two respondents for feedback, corrections, and clarifications. Both agreed with our data and analysis. Furthermore, we attempted to use rich, vivid participant descriptions and concrete details in this narrative while showing the voices of all the participants in the study.

Data Analysis. For this study we used an interpretive design to analyze participants' perceptions and experiences with regard to the leadership minor. We used content analysis protocols to analyze the data. The participants generated personal reflections concerning their experiences with the leadership minor through the focus group interview, written reflections, and the questionnaire. These reflections, either in the raw form or transcribed from interviews, were analyzed and coded for thematic content. We recorded and transcribed the one hour focus group interview while capturing the data from the written questionnaire and the student portfolios in raw form.

Content analysis. The data collected were analyzed and coded for thematic content. We used coding protocols outlined by Auerbach & Silverstein (2003) to perform the content analysis. We analyzed all data through a coding process which began with an initial reading of the collected data with the research concerns and the conceptual framework of Komives et al. (2005, 2006) as the lens. After the initial reading we coded the data using constructs consistent with the conceptual framework of this study. We recoded repeating ideas and grouped them into logical and coherent categories to form organized themes and abstract constructs.

Limitations. This research study is limited in scope because of the small number of participants we studied in greater depth, which limits the generalizability of the findings (Maxwell, 2005). While the information obtained through this study may be applicable for other leadership development programs, we make no attempt to generalize our findings beyond the participants in this study. Furthermore, the data collected from the focus group may not equally represent the views of all participants. We acknowledge not all participants were equally articulate, perceptive, or willing to share and therefore may not have contributed as much as other more dominant or articulate participants. However, through data triangulation, member checking, and through the moderator's encouragement for participation, we feel the data is representative of the perceptions and experiences of the participants in the study. Furthermore, as all participants self-identified as being white, we acknowledge a lack of racial diversity within the sample. White individuals comprise the majority of both the leadership minor, as well as the university itself. Although the lack of racial diversity in the leadership minor has implications for recruitment of more racially diverse individuals, the purposefully selected sample of individuals in this study did represent the population of the leadership minor.

Findings

Leadership development programs should consider the development of students' leadership identity (Komives et al., 2005, 2006). This study aimed to identify and describe changes in students' leadership identity while enrolled in an interdisciplinary leadership minor. Through this analysis, we identified evidence of multiple leadership identity stage changes among students in the leadership minor.

Students reported developing a greater sense of leadership as a result of their participation in the minor. Komives et al. (2006) developed a framework for measuring leadership identity and identifying signals of transition from one stage to another. We found participants in this study showed evidence of change in their leadership identity as they transitioned to different stages of identity. It is important to note, according to Komives et al. (2006), each individual can be positioned in multiple stages of leadership identity at a single moment in time depending on the content and context of their life situation.

Evidence of Transition from Stage 2: *Exploration/Engagement* to Stage 3: *Leader Identified*. This transition stage is signaled by students beginning to identify themselves as leaders as well as the identification of leadership skills needed to become a leader (Komives et al., 2006). Students in this transition also embrace the idea of leadership as leader-centric, in which only the leader can exert leadership traits (see Table 1). We found students in the leadership minor all identified themselves to some degree as leaders, regardless of their official leadership roles in organizations. Throughout the coding process we found no evidence of any student in the first or second stage of leadership identity.

Table 1
Evidence of Transition to Stage 3: Leader Identified

Transition categories	Participant Quotations
Identify as Leaders	<p>“I carry myself as a leader...this is what I do as a leader” (Reba, P1-P2).</p> <p>“I am a leader” (Sue, P60).</p> <p>“Do I think I am a leader? Yes, but I have a lot of room to grow” Ellen, P39)</p>
Identification of Skills Needed to Become a Leader	<p>“I don’t think I’m great at it yet but it was a great way to see how he [leader at her internship site] does it” (Ellen, F4).</p>
Leader-centric view	<p>Ellen wrote about her idea of leadership as “how to lead my peers” (P47) and “taking charge of situations” (P40).</p> <p>Hana talked about leadership as a “leader-follower relationship” and wrote, “I want to talk to people at the bottom and people at my level”.</p>

Evidence of Transition from Stage 3: *Leader Identified* to Stage 4: *Leadership Differentiated*. According to Komives et al. (2006), transition from stage three to stage four is signaled by learning and thinking in new ways that leads individuals to consciously practice new behaviors. Students in this transition stage also begin to embrace the idea that leadership can be practiced by more than just the leader of the group (see Table 2).

Table 2

Evidence of Transition to Stage 4: Leadership Differentiated

Transition categories	Participant Quotations
Practicing New Behaviors	<p>“It was neat to pull into the school side of things and try to use what I learned in class for my internship” (Amy, F3).</p> <p>“I...changed a lot of the ways I’ve thought about things and the way I do things now” (Tina, F9).</p>
Leadership Differentiated	<p>“I have learned how I lead and when others lead how to still benefit the group” (Tina, P27).</p> <p>“I used to think that a majority of leaders were born...Now it seems as if everyone has the capacity to lead” (Amy, P8).</p> <p>“Leadership looks different to everyone” (Ellen, P39).</p> <p>Fran wrote, “Anyone can be a leader” (P29) and mentioned her goal to “create a family environment regardless if I am not in charge” (P51).</p> <p>“I would...work together in a more democratic way where there isn’t a ‘leader’” (Sue, P62)</p>

Evidence of Transition from Stage 4: Leadership Differentiated to Stage 5: Generativity. According to Komives et al. (2006), transition from stage four to five is signaled by a commitment to a larger purpose and a concern for individuals’ core organizations, including the desire to mentor others in the leadership process (see Table 3). During this transition to stage five, students discover and develop their core values and philosophy as a leader.

Table 3

Evidence of Transition to Stage 5: Generativity

Transition categories	Participant Quotations
Commitment to a Larger Purpose	<p>“I want to invest into something that I believe in and something that lines up with my values” (Amy, P12).</p> <p>Sue explained that her leadership goals include “improving my leadership skills” by “getting involved with community service and student clubs” (P69)</p>
Concern for Future of Organization	<p>“I hope to share my leadership experiences with high school students, so when they come to college they have a better understanding of how to be successful” (Tina, P28).</p> <p>“I found myself mentoring some of the newer staff...” (Ellen, P7).</p> <p>“If students are new to the leadership minor there needs to be an encouragement to find someone to work with for the years that you’re in the minor” (Amy, F10).</p>
Leadership Philosophy	<p>“Through the minor, I actually discovered my leadership philosophy” (Hana, F9).</p> <p>Amy wrote about how experiences in the leadership minor caused “changes that have occurred in my heart, my spirit, and my life values” (P11).</p>

Evidence of Transition from Stage 5: *Generativity* to Stage 6: *Integration/Synthesis*.

According to Komives et al. (2006), transition into stage six is marked by students’ internalization of leadership identity and an understanding of their leadership potential wherever they go. Participants in this transition also value lifelong learning, learning from others, and reflect deeply about their leadership identity (see Table 4).

Table 4

Evidence of Transition to Stage 6: Integration/Synthesis

Transition categories	Participant Quotations
Internalization of Leadership Identity	Ellen talks about her leadership strengths as being portable, with a goal to “utilize them in situations” (F1). “I can’t say what I’m going to use but I know that my brain will make connections later in life” (Reba, F10).
Lifelong Leadership Learning	“I want to continue to learn more about my leadership over the course of my life” (Tina, P28).
Deep Reflection on Leadership	“Through reflection and observation of my personal leadership, I’m finding new ways to adapt to different styles and situations” (Ellen, P3).

Transition stages show evidence that students’ leadership identities were changing through involvement in the leadership minor. The context of the data suggests this change in identity was due to participation in the leadership minor. We found individual students would often signal different stages of leadership identity depending on the context or the content they were communicating. For example, Ellen at one point was identified as transitioning from stage two to stage three when talking about leadership in a leader-centric way. However, she was also identified in transitions three to four, four to five, and five and six when talking about her personal leadership development in a different context such as her leadership philosophy and discussing her internship experiences.

In addition to changes in students’ leadership identity, we found students perceived and were developing leadership skills through the leadership minor. The data were rich with student statements about specific skills and traits they developed from experiences in the leadership minor. Specific skills and traits that were shared multiple times by multiple students included empathy, confidence, adaptability, delegation, communication, developing relationships, teamwork, fellowship, respect, collaboration, organization, empowerment, conflict management, commitment to self-development, awareness of self and others, and commitment to leaving a legacy.

Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

As students reflected on their experiences, evidence emerged that students’ leadership identity was changed throughout their involvement in the leadership minor. Additionally, students identified through reflection, the development of leadership skills useful in their current and future leadership endeavors. Not only has this research led us to a clearer picture of the leadership minor experience, it has also developed our understanding of applying the work of Komives et al. (2005, 2006) in the context of a leadership minor.

Our findings show evidence of students' leadership identities changing during their time in the minor. As students reflected back to before they began in the leadership minor, it was evident they viewed leadership only as a position, a clear sign of stage three, leader-identified. As students talked about their view of leadership during data collection, it was evident a progression in leadership identity had occurred. Further investigation identified specific instances in which students identified a transition from one stage to the next because of a leadership minor experience. For example, Amy and Hana explained how their experiences in the leadership minor changed their philosophy of leadership. As a result of their experiences in the minor, Amy described a leadership identity shift through a change of heart, spirit, and life values, while Hana was able to discover and refine her own leadership philosophy.

We also identified that none of the students were clearly in one stage of leadership identity development throughout all contexts of their life. Some students would identify as stage six, integration/synthesis, when talking about their ability to develop a group or team in a class setting but would then revert back to a stage three, leader-identified, when talking about the next step in their career. These findings support the view of leadership identity development as a helix model in which individuals can re-visit different stages as they develop (Komives et al., 2005, 2006). Our findings suggest that perhaps although an individual may clearly exhibit having reached one higher level stage in one concept or area of leadership development, they may still identify with characteristics of lower stages in other areas of leadership identity development.

Leadership minor programs should consider the stages of leadership identity and analyze the stage at which students enter a leadership minor and the stage at which they exit a minor. Perhaps these stages should be built into the program's learning outcomes, and students should be encouraged to provide feedback given a specific context. This would allow leadership minor programs to determine the programmatic efforts which consistently move students to higher levels of leadership identity.

In addition to leadership identity change, students perceived leadership skill development as a result of the leadership minor. These findings support the argument that as leadership identity progresses, so does the development of skills (Komives et al., 2005, 2006). However, we do not know if certain skills are prerequisites to identity development. For example, Komives et al. (2005, 2006) suggested leadership identity development is spurred by social learning opportunities as well as individual reflection. Do these catalysts of leadership identity development (i.e. social interaction and individual reflection) require students to be able to communicate effectively and individually reflect? Alternatively, is a certain leadership identity stage necessary before students can start to develop specific leadership skills? For example, must students accept the leadership identity (i.e. stage three) before they can develop certain leadership attributes (e.g. leadership self-efficacy, influence skills)? Additional consideration should be given to the progression of students' leadership identity and leadership skills to empower leadership educators to create experiences which address students' leadership development given their leadership identity stage and leadership skills.

This study examined student perceptions of a leadership minor in terms of leadership identity. Although we acknowledge student leadership outcomes can be affected by programmatic inputs, we did not intend to examine that cause and effect relationship in this

current study. Given the dearth of research pertaining to leadership minors, we recommend future research continue to bridge the gap and focus on both programmatic inputs and student outcomes. This will aid our discipline in our ability to identify and transfer best practices from one program to another. Currently, most research addresses either programmatic inputs or outcomes without linking the two. Without this connection, one is left to wonder if the program is truly effective or what impact programmatic efforts have on leadership outcomes. We look forward to seeing future research which examines this from a holistic perspective and are optimistic that leadership education, specifically the development of minors, will continue to evolve into a structure that best meets the needs of all students.

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Author Biographies

Tyson J. Sorensen, PhD, is an Assistant Professor of Agricultural Education at Utah State University (USU). Tyson teaches a variety of undergraduate courses in agricultural education as well as other applied science courses at USU. Tyson’s research interests include exploring the concepts of personal and professional development among secondary agriculture teachers and the influence non-work factors on teachers’ efficacy and commitment in the teaching profession.

Aaron J. McKim is a graduate student within the Department of Agricultural Education and Agricultural Sciences at Oregon State University (OSU). Aaron teaches a variety of both graduate and undergraduate leadership and agriculture teacher education courses and helps with the facilitation of the leadership minor and an undergraduate leadership program at OSU. Aaron's research interests include exploring the connections between curricular experiences and leadership skill development within postsecondary leadership education.

Jonathan J. Velez, PhD, is an Associate Professor of Agricultural Education and Leadership at Oregon State University (OSU). Jonathan currently holds the Bradshaw Agricultural Sciences Leadership Education endowment and oversees the OSU Leadership Minor. Jonathan teaches both graduate and undergraduate leadership courses and his research interests include motivation, teaching methods, leadership development, and effective methods of leadership assessment.