

## The Leadership Pie: Grab Your Piece Before it's Gone!

Penny Pennington, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Oklahoma State University  
Stillwater, Oklahoma

### Summary

Leadership courses are and have been popping up at universities and colleges across the nation in a wide array of colleges and departments. And, why not, leaders are needed in every discipline, every field, and every profession. The *real story* is one of duplicating efforts, a lack of faculty support, and definitely an absence of collaboration. Splintering and duplication have resulted. The discipline of leadership at the collegiate level is being sold to the first bidder. The immediate product is ill prepared students of leadership. As to the long-term results, only time will tell.

### Recipe for Success?

I was recently hired as an assistant professor to teach leadership for a state supported university. The job announcement that lead me to the position stated, among many duties, that the faculty member hired for the position would be responsible for teaching both undergraduate and graduate leadership courses. Upon further discussions, I learned that one of my duties would be to develop a minor in leadership. The opportunity was appealing on many levels. Of course, as a recent graduate, a real-paying job met my immediate needs, but moreover the opportunity to teach leadership and to create a new program fed my passion.

In preparing for the interview process, I managed to remove the rose-colored glasses and began thinking about the reality of developing a new program in leadership. My previous experience in teaching leadership had also been at a public supported university. Our department was known by the students across campus as the place to enroll in leadership coursework. This reputation resulted in the department's leadership theory course achieving an annual enrollment of over 500 students from more than 60 different majors. And although we were definitely *doing* leadership, the political climate did not allow us to make a claim to leadership. Leadership was definitely not ours to include in the title of the department or the major. Furthermore, curriculum committees at the university level were known to highly scrutinize any course titles containing the term leadership. The reality of developing leadership curriculum and maneuvering the bureaucratic process was grim.

During the interview process, I shared my concerns regarding potential turf issues over leadership curriculum and the development of a minor in leadership. I was quickly assured that no one else at the university was *doing* leadership or, at least,

that the environment would support such an endeavor. In light of these reservations and with a bit of cynicism regarding the political atmosphere surrounding new leadership developments, I accepted the position and prepared to cross the state border.

I knew that my new journey would involve spearheading efforts to develop a minor in leadership. I hoped that my efforts would prove successful. After all, a minor would only require obtaining a small piece of the pie.

### **Have You Got Your Piece?**

Success, or so it appears! Within a year of crossing the state border, a slate of new courses was approved and the minor was official. Traversing a bureaucratic process expected to be plagued by ominous peaks and valleys actually proved to be more like navigating a gently winding road on a Sunday afternoon. The college, through the creation of the leadership minor, had been awarded a piece of the leadership pie. The courses were on the books, students enrolled in the minor, and to date each of the new courses had been offered at least once. My job was done.

But, wait! Soon after our college's victory, another campus college laid claim to a piece of the leadership pie, this time in the form of a leadership certificate. And their claim, too, was granted. This new leadership certificate would be awarded to students inhaling what appeared to be a "serve your self" buffet. The buffet of leadership coursework would be complements of various colleges across campus (including mine) in what appeared to be a collaborative effort.

But, *the real story* could not have ever been presented in the certificate proposal meetings. I never agreed that others could use my newly developed courses as part of their program. The *real story* is one of duplicating efforts, a lack of faculty support, and definitely an absence of collaboration. The newest piece of the pie had been awarded to what some (I) might describe as leadership bandits and in a college other than mine, no less!

Was I really surprised? Well, no, not really. In my observations everyone appeared to be teaching leadership. On our campus alone, there were leadership courses offered through various academic areas including agriculture, business, education, and leisure studies. There were also courses offered through student service areas including residence life and military sciences. And, why not, leaders are needed in every discipline, every field, and every profession. After all, leadership does not belong to one, but to all. Is it not just a simple question of supply and demand?

### **What About the Customer?**

We know we need leaders. And what better place is there to prepare our future leaders than the college campus. Does it then logically flow that everyone at the university with a doctorate can jump on the leadership bandwagon, hang a sign, and

declare himself or herself open for business? As a faculty member academically prepared to teach leadership, I think not.

As a result of differing opinions regarding the academic nature of leadership, our customers are being sold ineffective elixirs. [Translation.] On college campuses the reality is that leadership belongs to whoever has the faculty to teach the course, the wherewithal to push courses through curriculum committees, or the reputation to fill classroom seats. In a rush to beat others to the *leadership punch*, a prevailing assumption that those who have served in a leadership capacity are prepared to teach leadership has allowed those not academically grounded in the discipline of leadership to teach leadership. Does being a leader actually serve as the credential needed to teach leadership in the collegiate classroom? Again, my answer is “No, it does not.”

However, should not the hope be that faculty teaching leadership coursework are truly prepared in the discipline of leadership, that amidst the political games, passion for serving students supersedes egos, and that ultimately the customer, in this case the student, comes first? Should we not scrutinize leadership faculty and quality teaching in the leadership arena with the same rigor upheld by other disciplines?

We know that teaching about leadership in the university classroom has the potential to increase leadership development among college students. Regardless of where the learning process takes place, be it in a barn or a high-tech classroom, leadership education is taking place on our campuses. It is our responsibility to serve the students by developing their capacity for leadership. Furthermore, it is our responsibility to know our craft before advertising for apprentices.

### **Too Many Cooks in the Kitchen?**

Leadership courses are and have been popping up at universities and colleges across the nation in a wide array of colleges and departments. Not only is leadership coursework found in the social sciences, it is increasingly found in the agricultural, natural, and technical sciences. In simple terms, we all are teaching leadership—not only each campus, but also multiple threads within each campus.

And it appears that we are all facing similar turf issues. Few campuses have stand-alone leadership programs. Most leadership majors are contextually based or require a double major. Some are interdisciplinary.

Is there a better solution? Is it naïve to hope for collaboration, to pool our efforts, to make sure that the expertise and talents of our faculty are fully utilized? Can we quit arguing about who gets what piece of the pie, but rather work from the common ground we do share—student learning? How can we ensure leadership for all? Are we preparing faculty for the discipline of leadership? Are we allowing equal opportunity for everyone to join the ranks? Do we dare risk short-term successes in

favor of sustaining long-term relationships? Are we digging our graves or are we building bridges?

### **Can We Change the Recipe?**

I have my piece of the pie, but do I really want to let you (much less, help you) get yours? Now that I am in the club, I move that we change the rules. It appears to me that curriculum committees are approving new courses and programs (certificates, minors, majors) in leadership without understanding the discipline. Departments not willing to risk sharing their ideas with others, much less their resources, are gaining approval under the radar of departments that might be better prepared to really teach leadership. Splintering and duplication have resulted. And worse, the discipline of leadership at the collegiate level is being sold to the first bidder. The immediate product is ill prepared students of leadership. As to the long-term results, only time will tell.