

The Doctoral Student Leadership Institute: Learning to Lead for the Future

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to describe the Doctoral Student Leadership Institute, an initiative developed to hone the leadership skills of doctoral students from a wide range of disciplines. The components of the Institute and preliminary assessment measures with findings are discussed. We particularly were pleased with the outcomes of the Fellows through examination of their leadership assessments (especially the portfolios), the evaluation of the leadership course, and their success with the community service project. We hope this article will inspire other institutions to be forward-thinking in how they can best meet the leadership needs of their current and future graduate students.

Introduction

Although leadership education programs abound for undergraduate students at universities across the nation, there are fewer leadership development programs intended to meet the unique leadership education needs of graduate students. Many of the programs that do exist are focused in particular colleges and disciplines, such as in College of Education, higher education, or organizational leadership programs. Opportunities for doctoral graduate students to participate in interdisciplinary leadership programs are fewer still. These students have decidedly different leadership development needs than undergraduate students. One notable exception to the lack of initiatives for doctoral students is Rutgers the State University of New Jersey's Pre-Doctoral Leadership Development Institute (PLDI), which strives to prepare doctoral students for leadership positions in academia (June, 2010).

Interdisciplinary doctoral education and research in general has been advocated for many years, and initiatives such as the Integrative Graduate Education and Research Traineeship (IGERT), funded by the National Science Foundation (<http://www.nsf.gov/crssprgm/igert/intro.jsp>) has shown much success. IGERT awards began in 1997 and now comprise 125 award sites. According to its website, “the IGERT program has been developed to meet the challenges of educating U.S. Ph.D. scientists, engineers, and educators with the interdisciplinary backgrounds, deep knowledge in chosen disciplines, and technical, professional, and personal skills to become in their own careers the leaders and creative agents for change.”

According to the Council of Graduate Schools, in most well-established universities and in the best of circumstances, different PhD programs complement each other and provide stimulation and strength to the whole academic enterprise (Council of Graduate Schools, 2005). In terms of leadership training, interdisciplinary efforts allow students to interact with those individuals from various disciplines and cultures, thereby enhancing the breadth and depth of their experiences. It is important for future leaders to learn how to be catalysts for effective change across disciplines and boundaries.

In response to an unmet need, members of the Graduate School in our urban state university developed the Doctoral Student Leadership Institute (DSLII), a two-year, extra-curricular leadership development institute that is open to doctoral students from all disciplines. The first cohort of students began in Spring 2012. All participants complete a one-semester leadership course, additional semesters of leadership seminars, and several semesters of shadowing effective leaders (mentoring). They develop and implement a leadership plan, create a leadership portfolio, participate in a leadership journal club, attend leadership workshops and conferences, and, during their second year, plan a leadership forum to showcase their leadership knowledge and skills. The first cohort of Fellows also performed a service learning project teaching leadership skills to female middle school students. The Director of the Leadership Institute is the lead instructor for the formal leadership course and the leadership seminars held each semester after the formal course concludes. The seminars reinforce the theory and practice taught in the course. The Director is responsible for the workings of the Institute and the progress of the Fellows. Assistance is provided by one doctoral graduate assistant.

While the Rutgers’ PLDI aims to prepare doctoral students for leadership positions in academia exclusively, our DSLII focuses on leadership theories and skills that can be applied to professional paths in academia, industry, the non-profit sector, government, and globally. Nearly half of our Fellows wish to pursue careers not in academia. For this reason, the interdisciplinary DSLII is unique in both the breadth and depth of the leadership development experiences it offers doctoral students. This article provides an overview of this innovative initiative in order to encourage the development of similar programs for doctoral students in other universities.

Background

We developed the DSLII to challenge doctoral students to better hone the leadership skills that would prepare them for careers both in and out of academia while gaining experience in working with peers from different disciplines. As stated earlier, very few examples of such interdisciplinary institutes for doctoral students can be found in the literature. However the

general value of leadership education has been reported widely. Williams, Townsend, & Linder (2005) showed that collegiate leaders who participated in an introductory leadership course largely retained knowledge and used the competencies over time. A more recent study by Brungardt (2011) showed that students who graduate with a bachelor's degree in Organizational Leadership showed greater soft skill development compared to students who received a leadership certificate and had even more robust findings compared to students who received no leadership education. The majority of doctoral students in the DSLI receive no formal leadership education at our university. The components of the DSLI shown below closely follow those pedagogical elements that have been most successful in professional Leadership Institutes such as the American Council on Education (ACE) Fellows program and the Higher Education Resource Services (HERS) programs. These elements include completion of leadership course/seminars, professional development opportunities, development of signed leadership/mentoring plans, and having a strong network of peers and mentors (Leon & Nevarez, 2007).

A major purpose of the Institute is to bridge theory and practice so students can directly link leadership theories with practice in a multitude of contexts. Drawing on the work of Hickman (2010) and others, members of the DSLI leadership and guest speakers present leadership concepts in concert with concepts of change and change practices. The contexts include organizational, community, political, social action, and global. Hickman's text provides a framework for the students to delve into particular changes, such as life cycle, teleological, dialectical, chaos/complexity, and evolutionary with varying leadership styles and change practices. A few examples of particular types of leadership studied include servant, situational, transformational, charismatic, transactional, and path-goal. Change practices vary, but the Institute especially emphasizes collective, collaborative practices, ethics and change. In the Hickman text, relevant case studies complement the emphasis on leadership styles and change practices while also encouraging extensive reflection and discussion among the course presenters and students. Along with building on the longstanding leadership theories, models, and approaches, we plan to grow these general concepts with greater emphasis on women and leadership, culture and leadership, and leadership ethics in the future (Northouse, 2013).

The students' reading assignments also include a focus on current issues and trends in a variety of leadership settings, including academia, highlighted in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, organizationally in such publications as *The Harvard Business Review*, and in grey literature of various agencies and programs. These readings are selected based on timely leadership issues and strategies for success in a wide variety of settings. The leadership dilemma often presented in the article is followed up with discussion on what theory and/or best practice could help the situation now and into the future. Often the students have gravitated towards transformational leadership (Northouse, 2013, p. 186) as it empowers both the leaders and the followers. Transformational leadership has been a major focus of DSLI cohorts. For the seminars, students select and present at least three leadership issues in the news with the related theory and practice they believe would potentially improve the situation for the leader and the followers. A recent example was the leadership of college and university administration in addressing the concerns of adjunct faculty.

Students have also become more familiar with leading successful change through the work of Kotter and Rathgeber (2006), along with more current and contemporary publications such as Sutton's work on the characteristics of good bosses and bad bosses (2010) and Pam Iorio's book, *StraightForward* (2011). In addition, one of the students' favorite workshops focused on determining their leadership strengths by completing Rath's *Strengths Finder 2.0* tool (2007). In the DSLI, we have focused on traditional leadership theories and concepts, but we have also included contemporary publications that strive to link theory and practice. We continue to examine those variables and constructs that are common to several theories (such as task-orientation and people (group) orientation) and how and if they are applied in different leadership situations.

The DSLI is housed in the Graduate School (now the Office of Graduate Studies) and students are provided up to \$1000 per semester to attend outside conferences and events, and to purchase leadership books and materials to enhance their knowledge levels and skill sets. The Provost Office provides this funding. The program is marketed broadly to all doctoral students.

Doctoral Student Leadership Institute

Leadership Fellows

The DSLI Fellows hail from many disciplines, but they all share a keen interest in developing their leadership skills in order to become effective leaders in their chosen fields. To become a Leadership Fellow, an interested doctoral student must submit a brief essay describing previous leadership experience, a concise outline of leadership goals, explain how being a Leadership Fellow will aid in achieving those goals, and how he/she plans to put leadership skills to practice in his/her professional career. The applicant also submits a letter of recommendation from his/her major advisor.

The selection process is highly selective. Nearly 100 students applied to be members of the first cohort, which began activities in January 2012. From the applicant pool, the Graduate School administration chose 12 Leadership Fellows based on the strength of the applicants' essays and letters of recommendation.

A key feature of the Institute is the interdisciplinary interactions among doctoral students. While measuring the strength of the applicants' submitted materials, the selection committee also focused on crafting a diverse group of students who would bring the varying perspectives of their disciplines to bear on the leadership issues the Fellows would confront. A total of 23 Leadership Fellows, spanning two cohorts, have participated in the DSLI, representing nine of the ten colleges that offer doctoral degrees at our institution. The Fellows are also diverse in age, nationality, and ethnicity; elements that further add to the rich array of perspectives and life experiences that impact the Fellows' perceptions of leadership.

Leadership Course and Follow-up Seminars

During the first of four semesters of DSLI participation, all Leadership Fellows enroll in a doctoral-level leadership course called Building Leadership Skills Across Settings. The goal of

this course is to enhance leadership skills among doctoral students with a focus on leadership in various contexts and to provide mentorship by leadership professionals. Additionally, upon completion of the course, students should be able to describe various leadership theories and the application of these theories to leadership practice, discuss leadership skills that are effective in academic and non-academic settings, and develop a personalized leadership plan that incorporates the principles learned in the course with the individuals' leadership goals. In order to ensure that the Leadership Fellows learn about leadership theory and its different applications in multiple settings, each weekly class meeting has a specific leadership context as its theme, and along with the Director of the DSLI, proven leaders from that context share their experiences with the Fellows during the class. For the class dedicated to global leadership, for example, students complete readings on complex global issues involving multiple stakeholders and the leadership concepts and practices required at local, national, and international levels. During the global leadership class session, a panel of leaders from academia and other professional areas with global leadership experience broach issues of global leadership theory and practice with the Fellows in a seminar-style discussion. Examples of other class themes include college and university leadership, leadership in business and industry, non-profit leadership, and leadership in government.

For the remaining semesters in the Institute, Fellows attend a leadership seminar once a week that reinforces what was learned in the course, provides new and timely examples of leadership issues, and allows students the opportunity to refine leadership plans and other Institute deliverables.

Shadowing and Being Mentored by Proven Leaders

The Leadership Fellows spend the first three-fourths of the formal leadership course learning about leadership theory and practice across settings in order to prepare them for the hands-on leadership experiences that take place during the last four weeks of the course. Throughout the semester, each Fellow carefully considers his/her leadership needs and goals and his/her potential professional path, and, with those factors in mind, selects a proven leader from the university or community to serve as the Fellow's mentor. The exact nature of the mentor/mentee relationship varies and is dependent upon the needs of each individual Fellow, but all mentors agree to spend several hours per week with the Fellow and to help him/her develop and meet appropriate professional and leadership goals.

Although mentoring begins during the last weeks of the leadership course, it does not end when the course ends. Ideally, Fellows continue to spend several hours per week with their mentors during their subsequent three semesters of DSLI participation. Fellows are free to change mentors as needed with approval from the Director. In order to learn about different personal styles of leadership, we encourage participants to have at least two mentors during their four semesters as Leadership Fellows. The Fellow and mentor complete a Leadership Individual Development Plan based on sound principles of mentorship and the model from the National Postdoctoral Association (<http://www.nationalpostdoc.org/index.php/publications-5/mentoring-plans/mentoring-plan>). This plan allows the Fellow to assess skills, strengths, areas for growth, long-term and career goals and objectives, prioritized developmental needs to reach goals, and

specific approaches the Fellow and mentor will take to help the Fellow obtain the needed skills for success.

Leadership Plan and Portfolio

In order to provide focus and structure for achieving their leadership goals, the Fellows each write a detailed leadership plan during their first DSLI semester. Each Fellow tailors the leadership plan to suit his or her specific needs, but all of the plans must contain four elements: a vision of leadership, a leadership action plan, leadership history, and assessment of leadership growth and success.

The personal vision of leadership is a synthesis of the Fellow's knowledge of leadership concepts and his or her personal leadership experiences that reflect the Fellow's beliefs and assumptions. Additionally, the vision provides a foundation for the leadership action plan, which includes the Fellow's concrete goals for continuing to enhance his or her leadership abilities. In the action plan, the Fellow identifies the specific leadership skills required to achieve his or her goals and explains how past and current leadership experiences will assist him or her in meeting those goals. The leadership history portion of the leadership plan includes details about the Fellow's past leadership experiences with an emphasis on the lessons the Fellow gleaned from each experience. Finally, each Fellow includes an assessment of leadership growth and success. This section includes how the Fellows plan to evaluate the execution of the action plan and allows each Fellow the opportunity to reflect on the leadership experiences and the roles he or she has in the DSLI and how they shape his or her perceptions of leadership and leadership goals.

The leadership plan serves as a road map for the Fellows' leadership growth and development throughout their time in the Institute. While each Fellow drafts his or her leadership plan during the first semester, we expect and require the Fellows to modify and update their plans regularly in order to assess their progress and adjust their paths accordingly.

The purpose of the leadership portfolio is to highlight and share the Fellow's leadership achievements with others. The use of portfolios allows students to document their growth and development as leaders (Olsen, 2009). Each Fellow creates an on-line portfolio that includes the elements of his or her leadership plan, as well as other components tailored to the Fellow's discipline and future goals. Many Fellows choose to include writing samples, teaching philosophies, and other professional materials both related to and complementing their achievements as leaders. By creating a sharable and easy-to-update on-line portfolio, the Fellows generate a valuable record of their leadership growth and successes that they can share with colleagues, mentors, and future employers. Based on feedback from the Fellows, the portfolios have served as excellent learning tools.

Skill-building Workshops

Workshops focused on building key leadership skills are a key component of the DSLI experience. Fellows choose from up to six workshop offerings each semester and attend the sessions that best address their leadership development needs. While the Fellows have the ability to determine which workshops they attend during any given semester, there are five core

required workshops, offered on a rotating schedule, that they must attend. These include Leadership Styles and Patterns, Leading Organizations Effectively, Communication Skills - Oral and Written, How to Prepare for and Have a Successful Interview for a Leadership Position, and Creating a Leadership Portfolio. Experts facilitate the skill-building workshops, thus exposing the Fellows to a wide variety of leadership styles and perspectives.

In addition to the core required workshops, examples of other workshops we have offered include Global Leadership; Finding Funding and Managing Budgets; International Etiquette; Communicating with and through the Media; and Patents, Licensing, and Copyrights. Also, we encourage the Fellows to attend leadership-related workshops offered by other departments or organizations in order to broaden their leadership skill sets.

Leadership Journal Club

One of the principle goals of the DSLI is to ensure that the Fellows gain a solid understanding of current leadership scholarship. To that end, each cohort of Fellows forms a Leadership Journal Club. While the Fellows determine the exact structure and aims of their Leadership Journal Club, they must read and discuss at least one article from a field of leadership research each week. The Fellows choose the type of leadership research to explore as well as the articles they plan to read, and each Fellow has the opportunity to lead a Journal Club discussion at least once per semester. At the close of each semester, the Fellows compose a synopsis of the articles they discussed that includes the common threads about leadership that they encountered through their readings and discussions.

Leadership Forum

In their last two semesters, Fellows begin to plan the capstone event of their DSLI experiences: a Leadership Forum. The Fellows plan, orchestrate, and host the Leadership Forum on the campus during their final DSLI semester. Each Fellow contributes to the planning and execution, which features presentations of the Fellows' work throughout the Institute, such as their leadership portfolios, shadowing experiences, a summary of an area of relevant leadership scholarship the Fellows investigated through their Leadership Journal Club experiences, and the impact the DSLI had on the Fellows' professional, personal, and leadership development. The Spring 2012 cohort had an excellent Leadership Forum and welcomed an audience of higher-level administrators, faculty, students, and staff.

Leadership Service Project

Although not a requirement for the DSLI, the Spring 2012 Fellows decided they wanted to give back to the community and share what they had learned through their experiences in the DSLI. Through a professional contact of one of the Fellows, the students worked with middle school female students in a local school setting to build their leadership skills and potential. These students presented what leadership principles they were learning from the Fellows at the Forum described in the preceding paragraph. As a result of the interaction, the middle school students developed and implemented a drug awareness program for their peers within their school setting. Several Fellows who have graduated from the DSLI are continuing their work with the students

and the middle school in building leadership skills. The practical application of leadership is key as posited by many scholars (Komives, Dugan, Owen, Slack & Wagner, 2011) and this community service project is an example of a strategy that addresses this important skill.

Assessment

We have monitored the success of the DSLI to date through several mechanisms. These include the performance of the Fellows within the Institute and their evaluations of the efficacy of each of the Institute components. As of this time, the Spring 2012 Fellows have completed the Institute and the Fall 2012 Fellows are in their third semester. We began the second cohort in the Fall 2012 semester in order to put the Institute on a Fall start date from here forward. Two Fellows from the original Spring 2012 cohort did not continue; one left his doctoral program to pursue entrepreneurial interests, while another student left after accepting an administrative nursing position in another state. This student continues in her doctoral program and credits what she learned in the Leadership Institute as a major factor in her selection for her current position.

The Fall 2012 Fellows currently are completing all workshops, courses, and other Institute requirements. Their journal club is flourishing and semester reports show students actively engaged in activities. Two Spring 2012 Fellows found internship positions with their mentors and are working on initiatives to increase student success and global leadership opportunities throughout the institution. One Fellow from the Spring, 2012 cohort and another from the Fall 2012 cohort have accepted Fulbright awards to further their study in Germany and England, respectively. These Fellows have credited the DSLI with helping them prepare stronger Fulbright applications and perform better in interviews.

In addition to formal course evaluations, the Fellows complete open-ended semester evaluations to assess the efficacy of the following in meeting their leadership goals and objectives: courses offered, workshops, role of the journal club, mentoring experiences, and suggestions for improvement. To date, responses have been very positive (nearly 100%) and suggestions for improvement have been implemented, such as allowing time for more discussion of case studies in the leadership course, having a formal leadership class or seminar each semester, consideration of requiring the service project or multiple such projects, and suggestions for new workshops, especially those focused more on global leadership principles.

We plan to build more formal assessment tools in the future to measure leadership knowledge retention and skill use as we track the success of the Fellows throughout their time in the DSLI, through their degree programs, and as alumni practicing leadership skills. These longitudinal studies will allow us to assess the academic and career success of the Fellows as compared to other doctoral students who have not had the opportunity to study leadership in a focused but extracurricular manner. We will continue to update the Institute to ensure that its components are relevant, timely, and directly link theory with practice in an ever-challenging world for leaders.

Conclusions

The purpose of this manuscript is to share with the readers the components of the DSLI and a few initial assessment findings. We encourage other institutions to pursue leadership programs

that will best meet the needs of their students for leadership roles in a wide variety of settings. Students in the DSLI practice leadership skills in many ways, such as through development of leadership plans, mentoring proven leaders, conducting a leadership forum and a service project. It is now common knowledge that doctoral students may not secure employment in academic settings. Therefore there is a real need to provide all students with opportunities to develop their capacity to lead for change in both academic and non-academic contexts.

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Dr. Karen Liller is the Director of the University of South Florida Doctoral Student Leadership Institute. She serves as a full tenured professor in the USF College of Public Health specializing in public health and injury prevention. She also holds a joint academic appointment in the USF College of Medicine as Professor of Orthopaedics and Sports Medicine. Dr. Liller has undergraduate and graduate degrees in clinical laboratory science, technical education, and curriculum and instruction with a cognate in public health.

Dr. Liller has been the recipient of several awards/honors such as the first State of Florida Injury Prevention Award, the Tampa Bay Business Healthcare Hero Award and recently was named a Fellow of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. She has published extensively in top peer-reviewed publications and was named one of the top 15 national women scholars in health education and health promotion. She is the editor of the injury text, "Injury Prevention for Children and Adolescents: Research, Practice, and Advocacy," published by the American Public Health Association.