



## EXPLORING STUDENT MOTIVATIONS TO ENGAGE IN CURRICULAR LEADERSHIP EDUCATION

### Abstract

Postsecondary leadership experiences provide students opportunities to gain, enhance, and refine capacities useful in addressing the complex challenges of the world. Our exploratory, descriptive qualitative study examined the motivations of postsecondary students to engage in long-term curricular leadership education (CLE) programs. Interviews and focus groups from 29 participants identified expected outcomes, program characteristics, and social encouragement to be three primary motivators that interact to describe student engagement in CLE programs. This formed a basis for our initial conceptualization of curricular leadership education motivation of postsecondary students. Our findings serve as a foundation to explore postsecondary student motivation to enhance the practice and scholarship of leadership education. We offer a conceptual model illustrating our results as well as recommendations for practice and research.

### Introduction

The world is comprised of complex interconnected systems that frequently operate in ways that challenge the sustainability of all systems. Consequently, society faces increasingly complicated challenges like climate change, social inequality, and environmental degradation. Complex challenges illuminate both the need and potential for leadership to emerge from any individual, at any time, in any position, at any location (Ferdig, 2007). The urgency with which society must respond to identified, ubiquitous problems necessitates the development of leadership capacities among its members. In response, postsecondary institutions have increasingly supported new leadership development opportunities for students (Brown, 2004). Postsecondary leadership development opportunities take many forms, including intermural sports, student organizations, and curricular leadership education (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Our manuscript attends specifically to long-term, curricular leadership

education (CLE) offerings within postsecondary institutions, defined as sustained for-credit academic leadership experiences (e.g., programs, academies, majors, minors).

Research exploring the efficacy of long-term CLE programs highlights gains in citizenship, comfort with change, and increased leadership efficacy among participants (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Research supports the impact of CLE offerings and has identified a positive relationship between leadership coursework and leadership capacities (Rosch & Stephens, 2017) as well as a relationship between a first-year leadership development program and continued engagement in leadership behaviors (Posner, 2009). Identified outcomes associated with CLE programs illuminate the potential to empower postsecondary students with leadership capacities useful in addressing complex challenges. However, acknowledging the demand for a wide breadth of leaders (Ferdig, 2007), we recognize a need to understand how a larger

number of postsecondary students can be motivated to engage in CLE programs.

Motivation research within the context of postsecondary leadership education has primarily explored motivation to lead among students (Cho, Harrist, Steele, & Murn, 2015; Rosch, Collier, & Thompson, 2015) with scant attention given to motivations for engaging in CLE experiences. In the one study we identified, Moore, Grabsch, and Rotter (2010) explored student motivations for engaging in a leadership learning community using McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory. They found evidence of motivation stemming from the need for achievement and need for affiliation and less evidence of motivation associated with the need for power.

Existing research suggests that CLE programs provide a valuable context in which to develop leadership skills among postsecondary students (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Posner, 2009; Rosch & Stephens, 2017). However, little is known about student motivations for engaging in CLE programs. In the absence of such knowledge, program leaders are ill-equipped to motivate a broader scope of students. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore the motivations of students enrolled in three long-term CLE programs offered at two postsecondary institutions. Specifically, the research question that guided our study was, in what ways are postsecondary students motivated to engage in curricular leadership education programs? We argue a focused exploration of student motivations to engage in CLE programs has the potential to inform the recruitment of students into programs, expanding the scope of postsecondary students empowered with critically important leadership capacities.

## Methods

We employed an exploratory, descriptive qualitative approach to investigate postsecondary student motivations to engage in CLE programs. Descriptive qualitative research allows for a concise and specific

description of a phenomenon from the perspective of participants while allowing researchers to answer questions of special relevance to their practice (Sandelowski, 2000). This approach allows researchers to employ eclectic yet appropriate tools for sampling, data collection, data analysis, and presentation of findings to answer their research question (Sandelowski, 2000).

We situate ourselves within the pragmatic and constructivist worldviews. Pragmatism is characterized by a focus on finding solutions to problems (Creswell, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and an acknowledgment that "truth is what works at the time" (Creswell, 2009, p. 11). We accept our participants' lived experiences as true and valid knowledge claims, reflective of their unique realities (Magilvy & Thomas, 2009). As constructivists, we acknowledge that our participants construct reality as they interact with their social worlds, and "meanings are constructed by human beings as they engage with the world they are interpreting" (Crotty, 1998, p. 42).

**Participants.** Twenty-nine participants were purposefully sampled based on participation in postsecondary leadership development programming within three CLE programs at two large research-intensive universities in the United States (see Table 1). The first program was the Leadership Academy at Oregon State University. The Leadership Academy is a year-long leadership development program offered to undergraduate, on-campus students enrolled in the College of Agricultural Sciences and the College of Forestry ( $n = 10$ , six females, four males) at Oregon State University. Once students are selected for the program—which is accomplished through an application and interview process—students meet throughout the year for a two-hour weekly seminar that involves leadership workshops, guest speakers from the agriculture and forestry industries, and opportunities to discuss the book selected for the term. Students are also paired with a faculty mentor to help them process their leadership and personal development throughout the year and are provided

the opportunity to apply for scholarship funding to attend professional conferences. Students in the Leadership Academy earn one to two credits per term, although the seminar does not have extensive academic requirements (e.g., no exams, no textbook). All ten students in the program during the 2013-2014 academic year volunteered to participate in this study.

The frame for the second program represented an interdisciplinary campus-wide leadership minor (n = 14, nine females, five males) at Oregon State University. This comprehensive 28-credit minor includes curriculum focused on personal leadership development, team and organization leadership development, leadership theory, as well as an internship component and a capstone class, among others. It consists of approximately 60 students with roughly 15 students completing the minor each year. Students who declare the minor have majors, which include but are not limited to engineering,

communications, business, and agricultural sciences. For this study, the 14 participants were students who were enrolled in the 2014 capstone class, which is offered on campus during the spring term.

The third CLE program is the Litton Leadership Scholars program, a year-long sophomore leadership program offered to students in the College of Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources at the University of Missouri (n = 5, three female, two male). Once selected for the program through an application and interview process, students participate in a weekly seminar course where they discuss relevant leadership and agricultural topics, interact with industry professionals, and discuss ways to make impactful change in their world. The students who participated in this study included five of the 18 students in the program during the 2013-2014 academic year. These individuals were purposefully selected to represent the group based on age, major, and gender.

**Table 1.**  
*Participants in Three CLE Programs at Oregon State University and the University of Missouri*

Program Type	n	Program Eligibility	Program Descriptors
Leadership Academy	10	Undergraduate students studying agriculture or forestry;  Admittance via application and interview	Year-long program;  Weekly two-hour seminar;  Faculty mentor;  Scholarships available to attend professional conferences;  Connection to industry professionals through guest speakers
Leadership Minor	14	Interdisciplinary;  No admittance requirements	28-credit minor;  Consists of approximately 60 students;  Involves students studying engineering, communication, business, and agricultural sciences, among others
Litton Leadership Scholars	5	Undergraduate students studying agriculture;  Admittance via application and interview	Year-long program;  Weekly seminar;  Connection to industry professionals through guest speakers

Data Collection. Data were collected during the spring of 2014 using focus groups and one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Focus groups are “guided or unguided group discussions addressing a particular topic of interest or relevance to the group and the researcher” (Berg, 2007, p. 144). Data were collected from participants in the leadership minor (n = 14) and the Litton Leadership Scholars program (n = 5) using the focus group method. Berg (2007) recommended focus groups should consist of no more than seven participants; therefore, the 14 participants enrolled in the leadership minor were split into two groups, each containing seven participants while the five participants in the sophomore-level leadership scholars program remained together. A semi-structured approach was used to elicit participant information regarding motivations to engage in their respective CLE program. Five initial questions guided the focus groups. These included 1) What were your motivations to pursue this leadership program? 2) Were your motivations based on the recommendations of others? 3) What other leadership programming were you involved in prior to this experience? 4) How were your motivations to engage in this experience the same or different from your motivations to engage in other leadership programs, opportunities, or experiences?, and 5) Why is it that you pursued this leadership experience instead of other programs, clubs, and opportunities on campus?

Data were collected from participants in the Leadership Academy (n = 10) using one-on-one, semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews are characterized by the researcher being prepared for the interviews with an outline of questions; however, the researcher is also able to explore topics through impromptu questions (Maxwell, 2005). Data from the focus group sessions were used to refine the interview protocol for the one-on-one interviews. Additionally, while the initial selection was based on involvement in an identified CLE experience, other postsecondary leadership programs students were involved in, and not involved in, were explored during the interviews. Six overarching questions guided the interviews.

These included, 1) What initially motivated you to join the Leadership Academy? 2) How did your previous knowledge and experiences in leadership influence your decision to join the Leadership Academy? 3) Did other people influence your decision to join the Leadership Academy and if so, who and how? 4) Was your motivation for joining the Leadership Academy different from your motivations for enrolling in other leadership programs/experiences? If so, how?, 5) There are leadership programs that you do not participate in on campus; what is it about these programs that make you not enroll? and, 6) How involved in leadership development program were you before the Leadership Academy?

Both the focus group sessions and the one-on-one interviews were conducted at the conclusion of students’ involvement in the leadership opportunities described above. The focus groups each lasted approximately 45 minutes and the one-on-one interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes. The audio-recorded interviews and focus groups were conducted by authors of the current study and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis. Students’ motivation for engaging in leadership development programs is a phenomenon scarcely studied in leadership education literature. Maxwell (2005) recommended the use of an inductive method when the area of interest has been understudied. For this reason, we employed analytical tools from Glaser and Strauss’ (1967) grounded theory methodology. Given this, we analyzed our data using inductive, theoretical coding. In theoretical coding, potential relationships between codes are explored throughout the coding process as a method for building theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1997). In conjunction with theoretical coding, Strauss and Corbin recommended constant comparative analysis in which the researcher is developing the theory and reviewing the data in an iterative process. We began this iterative process with an initial reading of the manuscripts. After an initial read, we inductively coded the transcribed interviews and focus groups (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) and crafted theoretical memos that alluded to potential relationships

among the codes found in our initial coding (Berg, 2007). This initial researcher coding occurred independently. After the initial open coding of the data was completed, we met as a research team to review each other's codes and determined a list of final codes for the data. Additionally, we developed a list of counter-codes to identify findings counter to the suggested code (e.g., code = interest in learning about leadership; counter code = leadership cannot be learned). Once a list of final codes and counter-codes was established, we independently returned to the data and recoded the transcripts using the final list of codes and counter-codes. We then compared our final coding; those codes with convincing data supporting the counter-codes were either modified or removed. Additionally, we conducted an inter-rater reliability check on the remaining codes; this check found an internal consistency among coders of 89%.

After an analysis of the codes, we met to discuss potential themes that could encompass multiple codes used through this analysis (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). After themes were developed, we turned our attention to exploring potential relationships within the data, as recorded in the theoretical memos. Based on the individually developed theoretical memos, as well as the group discussion of the data, emergent themes were developed into broader theoretical constructs (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003). Then, as a research team, we developed a list of potential relationships between these theoretical constructs. For each proposed relationship, a counter-relationship was also developed. The counter-relationships specified codes, quotes, or relationships within the data that would refute the posited relationship (Berg, 2007). Each researcher then individually went through the data to find confirming evidence of the posited relationships and counter-evidence of suggested relationships. We met again to discuss the findings from this stage of data analysis. Suggested relationships were either kept, reworked, or removed based on the presence of supportive evidence and counter-evidence found in the data. The theoretical constructs and relationships

that were overwhelmingly supported by the data were then utilized and shared in the findings below.

**Research Validity.** Maxwell (2005) identified two potential threats to qualitative research validity: researcher bias and reactivity. Maxwell described researcher bias as the potential for researchers to make the data fit preconceived notions. Reactivity refers to the influence the researcher's presence has on the participants and the data shared. Although qualitative researchers are unable to prove that conclusions are valid, systematic approaches can be utilized to test conclusions against identified threats to validity (Maxwell, 2005). In an effort to test the conclusions against the potential validity threat of researcher bias, we transcribed all data verbatim. Maxwell (2005) recommended verbatim transcription as a method to ensure the researcher does not merely document the data he/she feels are important. We also utilized participant quotations and rich data throughout the manuscript to support the conclusions made. Quotations were included to allow readers to compare conclusions with the raw data presented by participants. Additionally, we used counter-codes and counter-relationships throughout the coding process to ensure the posited codes and relationships were justified by the data (Berg, 2007).

**Reflexivity.** In qualitative research, the researcher is the research instrument (Berg, 2007). Therefore, it is important for researchers to identify potential biases to allow readers to consider bias. Each researcher in the current study is engaged in leadership development at the postsecondary level. Additionally, most are involved at various levels, including teaching and advising roles, in the three leadership development programs from which participants were recruited. Through the use of continual meetings, cross-checking of codes, the use of counter-codes, and rich descriptions of the data, we attempted to overcome our potential biases and believe the findings presented below are valuable to understanding leadership development. Additionally, as with any social science research, this study assumes the truthfulness of participants and respondents' perceptions of lived experience as valid

representations of their actual experience.

## Findings

The rich reflections and descriptions provided by participants revealed complex and multi-dimensional motivations for engaging in postsecondary CLE programs. Students attended different universities, engaged in diverse CLE programs, and identified a multitude of factors as motivations for participating in respective CLE programs. However, students formulated motivations to participate in similar ways, thus enhancing the credibility of our findings. Our findings evolved as connections between three primary concepts interacted to explain student motivations for engaging in a postsecondary CLE

program. The three primary concepts are expected outcomes, program characteristics, and social encouragement. Namely, students expected to obtain specific outcomes as a result of involvement in selected CLE programs. Specific program characteristics would perceivably afford identified outcomes, and encouragement received from others ignited and/or bolstered motivation by illuminating and/or affirming specific program characteristics and/or expected outcomes. We first offer a conceptual model of our findings that captures the connectivity and interaction between the three primary concepts and eight subsequent sub-themes (see Figure 1). This is followed by descriptions and representative quotations from participant interviews and focus groups, unpacking each primary concept and sub-theme.

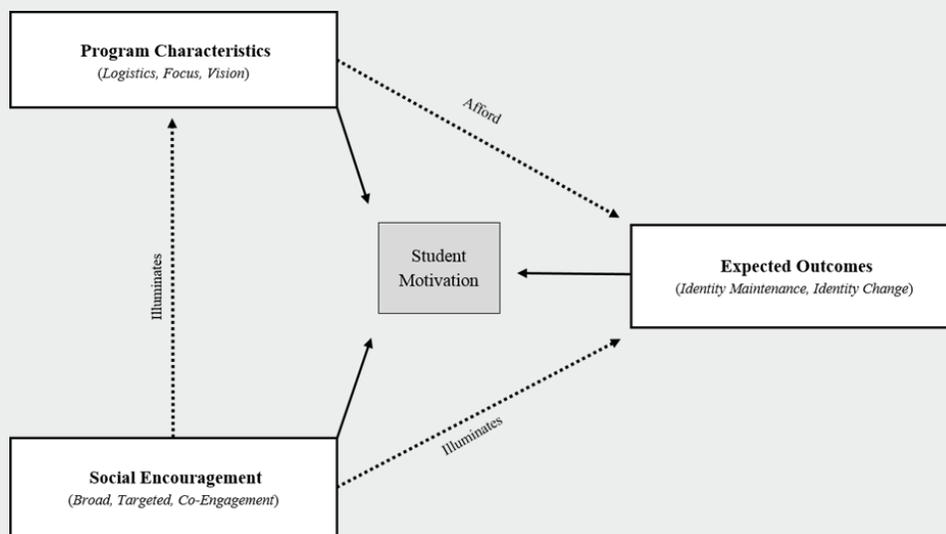


Figure 1. A conceptual model describing curricular leadership education motivation

Expected Outcomes. Students referenced outcomes expected as a result of participation when discussing motivations to engage in selected CLE programs. Articulated outcomes were considerable and varied by student. However, taken together, themes of identity emerged as students sought to either maintain an existing component of their identity, or change, develop, or enhance it.

Identity Maintenance - Students were motivated to engage in a CLE program because of a belief it would display or extend an element of their identity. Many participants already identified as leaders. As such, the prospect of engaging in a program requiring the application of skills associated with an existing leadership

identity was important. This preexisting leadership identity was in large part due to prior experiences. Thus, involvement in a collegiate leadership program was seen as a natural next step. For example, Ben noted, "when I heard about it, I was like 'wow that's a really cool idea' because I've always been involved in leadership, and leadership has always been something that I've gone more to." Another example is Alex, who expressed the desire to continue leadership involvement from high school, "for me, I had really gained a lot of leadership skills in high school through FFA and other organizations... so I wanted to continue my leadership building in college." As a result of identifying as an existing leader, other students saw selected CLE programs as an opportunity to extend or apply leadership knowledge gained from prior experiences. For example, Isabella shared how she first heard about her selected CLE program, stating, "one of the big things that I noticed on the Litton website was that they... talked about the application of leadership skills, and that was something that really interested me." Similarly, Rhett stated, "I wanted to basically integrate all the things that I already belonged to coming into college...I wanted to make sure that I had some kind of possible leadership experiences through each of those pieces."

**Identity Change** - Participants also emphasized how postsecondary CLE programs provided an opportunity to change, develop, or build a component of their identity. For some, the CLE program was seen as an opportunity to become or be perceived as a leader by peers and future employers. The perception of growth often transpired in respondents mentioning the CLE program as a resume-building opportunity. For example, Caleb said he is "always looking for a leg up in

building a resume and having/obtaining skills others may not have the chance to get." Similarly, Sanders perceived involvement would be a "huge thing on that resume and...make you stick out of a group of people too." While the promise of an enhanced resume intrigued many students, others saw involvement as an opportunity to challenge themselves, grow personally, and learn how to become a better leader. Taylor, for example, had prior industry experience as well as an established resume. However, Taylor identified a need for development commenting, "I have managed crews... through both fire and law enforcement. And the realization that even though I had the qualifications on paper didn't mean that I had the qualifications inside."

Others desired several benefits, such as Karli who said, "it was focused on making me a better - not only student, but leader, and a better person and I knew I was gonna need that" or Meg who reflected, "it just looked like a program that would help me to be more well-rounded and be intentional with everything."

Identity change also emerged as students discussed desired changes as a result of involvement. Zack, for example, saw the experience as an opportunity to get out of his comfort zone, "I wanted to break down those barriers...more to put myself out there, put myself in situations where I would have to talk with other people and communicate in a more professional sense." An additional student, Adam, reflected that he enrolled because "it put you in an atmosphere that challenges you to be more articulate...to be able to work on how you come across to individuals." Ryan talked about identity change as more transformative sharing, "I wanted to have my own identity, so I wasn't just following

my brothers and sisters' footsteps. I wanted to be my own individual, so that pushed me to do more leadership stuff."

**Program Characteristics.** Students identified specific characteristics of selected CLE programs as major factors influencing the decision to participate. Characteristics ranged from logistical aspects of the program to elements centered on the focus or vision of the program.

**Logistics** - Participants identified logistical elements such as the opportunity to earn credit or fit the program into a schedule/degree plan as important motivating factors to engage in selected CLE programs. Amber, for example, emphasized the utility of the program as both an opportunity to earn college credit while simultaneously gaining leadership skills:

I think one of the great things about the minor is that you're learning those leadership skills and doing the program but you're getting college credit for it and so it seems more useful I guess. Like, if you're going to be a part of a club that you're going to get a ton of leadership experience out of it, that's great, but you're not necessarily going to get credit for it so it's another time commitment alongside school.

Other students, like Riley, echoed the ability to earn credit stating, "It was nice that a lot of the credits overlapped with the college of Ag, so that was convenient", while others, such as Cheyenne, used the leadership minor to fulfill academic requirements, "I needed more credits and I was scrolling down through different minors and I found it and I was like 'sweet, I love leadership' it's not just like I needed more credits but I did need a minor." Students also emphasized the appeal of a longer leadership program, which afforded opportunities to develop, enhance, and transform leadership over time. Gabrielle,

for example, became intrigued with the program because it was not "a 48-hour conference or a week conference where you jam it all in" but rather an opportunity to "push yourself and change over time." Ryan felt the same way stating, "it's really hard for me to just, with time constraints and devoting one weekend when I have a lot of other stuff going on, so I really like how this was spread out and over a year."

**Programmatic Focus** - Participants cited the focus of the program, or specific components of it, as motivating factors to engage in a CLE program. Programmatic components ranged from structural elements such as class size, number, and diversity of students, and learning outcomes, to more specific elements such as particular assignments, built-in reflection time, and opportunities to receive critical feedback. In the case of Karli, a curriculum focused on personal growth was important:

I wanted to do Leadership Academy versus the other program because it was centered around me; it was centered around helping me grow as an individual. And I thought, I mean I never really had that...attention, I guess, I never really allowed that attention to sit there and really like make yourself grow and be better as a leader.

Other students, such as Memphis, were interested in the flexibility of the program; he remarked, "The leadership minor allows you to choose where you want to go and what you want to do and when you want to do it. I thought it was pretty convenient." Kynlee echoed the thoughts of Memphis when discussing the internship component of her CLE program, stating, "I think that's what was really helpful with the minor because you can kind of pick your own style and like any direction you want to go and find a

leadership spin on it.”

Vision - Alignment of the CLE program vision with participants’ personal identity or vision for themselves also sparked student motivation. This was the case for Isabella, who was intrigued by a program that brought together a diverse group of people sharing a common goal:

Something that specifically drew me to this program was that it was through the College of Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources and I knew that the culture and students who surround me would have a common goal of working to feed the world or to advocate for agriculture, even though we have completely different leadership styles, majors and backgrounds.

Interestingly, when participants were asked why they would choose not to participate in a particular CLE program, reflections regarding program vision and identity also surfaced. Specifically, motivation to engage in a particular CLE program decreased if the student’s identity was in conflict with the program vision. Many students stated this in simple, matter-of-fact terms such as Mollie, who said, “it kinda went against my values” or Mary, who noted, “this isn’t really my thing” when discussing other programs and academies. We saw this also from Isabella, who passionately spoke about other CLE programs as deterrents:

I would not attend a women’s leadership conference even though I’m female, and I would never attend a Hispanic leadership conference, even though I’m Hispanic. Because I never want to limit myself to any of the things I cannot control. And so I don’t want to be identified that way, and I will not identify myself that way. And so I think that’s something really big for me.

Social Encouragement. Participants identified

encouragement and potential engagement with others as significant sources of motivation to engage in selected CLE programs. The strongest social motivators came via interactions with peers, family members, and institutional professionals who encouraged or supported students in either a broad or targeted manner. The anticipation of participating in a CLE program with peers also served as social encouragement.

Broad - Motivation to engage in a CLE program often began as a result of broad encouragement from others. This frequently originated from colleges, departments, or programs within the university, aiming to connect students to opportunities. Many participants attributed the initial connection to email announcements about the CLE program. For Lauren, an informational email from her advisor catalyzed motivation. She said, “the advisor gives out weekly emails with all the news for the week, and...I needed more credits, and I usually didn’t go for leadership roles, I just did my own thing. So I wanted to challenge myself.” Zack read about it in a newsletter and thought, “it seemed like something I could do and applied for it, and ended up getting in.” Other students identified a basic desire to “get involved” as a motivating factor to join a CLE program. This desire arose from parents, former teachers, or other influential individuals. Ronan, for example, stated, “We’re always told, ‘get into college, get involved in something.’ And this really went hand in hand with that...the leadership really couples with that kind of involvement and really helps that along.”

Targeted - Specific individuals such as institutional professionals, peers, and family members also served as strong motivators for students to participate in CLE programs. Students referenced the influence and motivation fostered

by institutional professionals and often heeded their word prior to knowing all the details about the program. This advice often came in the form of a direct command where faculty and staff would “tell,” “nudge,” or “suggest” students to apply. Amirah, for example, said, “I would not have thought to join any of them had my advisor...not been like, a mandate from her”. Participants also revealed one-on-one interactions, whether in person or via email, made students pay attention and heed the advice of institutional professionals.

Karli, for example, detailed how one of her professors was an influential motivator:

Sue is the reason why I decided to-why I even had the information...she emailed me personally and said like ‘you should look at this’. And, from my perspective, I think that is really the way to go if you want to get students. Because when I get an email, personally, from a professor, I pay attention to it.

For Ryan, a similar interaction occurred between him and his advisor:

I didn’t know about the Litton Scholars program until my advisor mentioned to me about taking it, and then once he mentioned about the opportunities and the stuff that it really allows you to do, I was interested after that. It was because of my advisor pushing me and recommending it to me that I decided to do it.

Peers who were largely identified as highly involved upperclassmen also served as motivators, albeit in a different manner. In one respect, targeted peer interactions were initiated to verify or affirm a student’s preliminary consideration to join a CLE program. Christopher illustrated this by stating, “having conversations with past fellows was very helpful because they let me know what the program structure

looks like...from a student perspective, and how they fit in, and why they did it.” Peers were also influential in a more vicarious manner. Past actions of peers, such as holding positional leadership roles, influenced students to emulate observed actions. For example, Gabrielle reflected, “a lot of the people that influenced me were older students within the college who had been successful in other clubs, having offices or serving on committees and such.” Similarly, Alex stated he “look[s] towards those people that had previously been involved in Litton Scholars and were involved on campus, and so they really recommended the program, which is partially why I joined.”

Co-Engagement - Students attributed co-engagement, the prospect of learning from, or participating with another individual or group of individuals, as a motivating ingredient to participate in a CLE program. For several students, co-engagement emerged as an opportunity to engage in a leadership experience with an existing friend. Oscar illustrates the theme of co-engagement by stating:

Often times, I join an organization because my friend says, ‘hey you should go do this with me,’ or ‘this is a really cool thing that I’m going to do, and we’re making an impact in these places,’ so for me, that’s a big factor.

Others were intrigued by the prospect of interacting with and learning from others in a safe and welcoming environment. Students perceived leadership learning environments as spaces for personal connection, the sharing of different perspectives, and candid conversations. Alex, for example, spoke about the benefits of co-engagement with diverse students stating, “we can talk about things in other clubs and how we can apply those

in other areas of our lives, too. And so for me, that's really cool, to see the different perspectives." Ryan had similar thoughts stating, "I wanted to get to know people... so I could relate to them to a certain extent and really get to network in a way and kind of understand where they are coming from."

## Discussion

Participation in a CLE program was predominantly perceived as an opportunity affording particular outcomes, and these expected outcomes varied by student ranging in outcomes from identity maintenance to identity change. Programmatic characteristics of particular CLE programs, which also varied within our sample, were seen as conduits fostering expected outcomes. While a few students made the connection between programmatic characteristics and desired outcomes individually, encouragement from others, especially peers and institutional professionals, significantly bolstered motivation. Specifically, motivation occurred as individuals illuminated programmatic characteristics in relation to outcomes the student would gain as a result of participation. Karli, for example, initially searched for a CLE program in her senior year in college because she wanted to enhance her resume and gain leadership skills prior to employment (expected outcomes). After initially hearing about one CLE program through a professor (social encouragement), she sought additional information about several CLE programs. The interaction with a faculty member prompted Karli to revisit her initial conversation and seek an additional conversation with a second professor about what each program entailed. Eventually, Karli decided the focus and structure of the Leadership Academy (program characteristics) would best afford her expected outcomes. Jessica, a student from a different university, also demonstrates the interactive nature of our findings, albeit in a different manner. Due to her high school leadership involvement in the National FFA Organization, her participation in a

collegiate CLE program would afford a continuation of her existing leadership identity (expected outcomes). Conversations with alumni of the CLE program and professors (social encouragement) told her the program focus and structure (program characteristics) would be a great experience; thus, accomplishing her desires to learn from others and expand her thinking (expected outcomes). Throughout the research process, it became increasingly evident that the primary concepts did not occur in isolation. Rather, each primary concept and secondary theme interacted to cultivate student motivation.

Interestingly, the three primary concepts from our findings, to some extent, relate to the sources of motivation found in the exploration by Moore et al. (2010), using McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory of student motivations to engage in a leadership learning community. Moore et al. found stronger evidence of motivation related to the need for achievement and the need for affiliation. The two domains of motivation supported by Moore et al. relate somewhat to two domains found in our findings. First, the expected outcomes concept could be linked to the need for achievement, both indicating students engage in postsecondary leadership with a vision of gaining a more robust leadership skillset. However, while Moore et al.'s findings were more about obtaining specific skills, our findings pointed toward identity maintenance and change, a finding we argue adds to existing the knowledge base. Second, social encouragement could be linked to the need for affiliation, illuminating the importance of others to increase awareness of, and commitment to, engaging in CLE. However, unlike in the Moore et al. study, social encouragement was most often used as a means to illuminate either the characteristics of the CLE program or the expected outcomes of the CLE program.

Further, neither Moore et al. nor the current findings support the need for power as a motivating factor for students to engage in postsecondary CLE programs. Building upon previous work, we argue our findings add program characteristics,

recognizing student motivation for engaging in CLE is a reciprocal relationship between the individual and program, influenced by the diversity of programs and individuals. Additionally, our findings offer explanations of how each of the three characteristics is interconnected, a missing component in McClelland's Achievement Motivation Theory. While the current research is a first step in exploring the complex and intricate nature of postsecondary student motivation, we argue our findings provide a useful genesis for further examination of CLE student motivation.

**Limitations of the Study.** The research methods employed in this study have some limitations. Participants in this study were students from Oregon State University and the University of Missouri, with approximately half of them studying agriculture, natural resources, forestry, or a related science. Given this, we acknowledge the sample of students in this study is not representative of all students in CLE programs across the country, nor do we claim our findings are generalizable.

Also, the nature of data collection, specifically the focus groups, could have limited the richness of findings and impeded participants' willingness to share, resulting in response bias. This may have been especially true given the researchers who conducted the interviews were leaders/instructors of the respective CLE program. This position, imbued with power, may have influenced the type and amount of information offered during data collection. Specifically, participants may have shared what they thought we wanted to hear or refrained from speaking honestly about the program. To mitigate these effects, we endeavored to call out contradictions in our findings, paying particular attention to evidence that countered the more salient codes and themes. While we made attempts to minimize response bias, its effects are unknown.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Leadership education exists, in part, to empower learners with the capacities needed to solve

problems and initiate change for the betterment of our world. Increasingly, awareness suggests that the development of leadership capacities is not reserved for a select few and, in fact, all are well served to engage in leadership education (Ferdig, 2007). Expanding leadership education to a broader range of individuals presents an exciting challenge and opportunity for individuals and institutions offering leadership education experiences. Seizing the opportunity requires answers to a myriad of questions, including identifying what motivates students to engage in leadership education. Our study sought to address this question by exploring student motivation to engage in long-term, CLE programs at the postsecondary level.

Findings illuminate the diversity of potential motivations to engage in postsecondary CLE programs while recognizing motivations mirror the diversity in students. Students enter into CLE programs with differing experiences and personal characteristics, guiding and motivating them to choose a CLE accordingly. This study served to develop a general understanding of involvement in CLE programs; therefore, it did not meticulously address this diversity among participants.

Future research should explore how diverse personal characteristics (e.g., class level, sex, major, race/ethnicity, career goals, past leadership experience) influence the salience of identified predictors. Questions for future exploration could include, do certain program characteristics attract students at particular levels in their college career?, to what extent do previous leadership experiences contribute to student motivation to engage in a CLE program? and, do certain programs privilege or disadvantage certain racial or ethnic student groups? Answering these and similar questions would guide scholars and practitioners in designing, marketing, and evaluating CLE programs.

The diversity of students targeted by CLE programs implies diverse motivations for engagement; therefore, programs should not seek to homogenize. Rather, programs should illuminate, for students,

what makes them distinct. Transparency of CLE program characteristics (e.g., vision, focus, target population, engagement level) may empower students to make more informed decisions about enrolling in a program best aligned with personal motivations. To help facilitate connections, CLE program leaders should empower the population of current and past program participants to recruit for the program, illuminating the success of students with diverse characteristics and experiences. Specifically, utilizing current and former students of the program to share stories of lived CLE experiences through strategic marketing and advertising efforts (e.g., videos, face-to-face recruitment meetings, student spotlight stories on social media) may be effective. Additionally, equipping faculty with information about the CLE program to help direct students toward a program that would best address interests and afford expected outcomes is critical. Further, research exploring CLE program marketing and student success may also illuminate strategies for the recruitment of successful students to specific CLE programs.

While the participants in this study were diverse and shared diverse motivations, we recognize this study examined only three CLE programs at two universities. Future research should explore student motivations for involvement in other CLE programs across the country. This could include programs solely offered online, graduate-level CLE programs, or programs with more specialized coursework (e.g., adventure leadership-type programs, programs with a social justice focus).

Postsecondary leadership experiences provide students opportunities to gain, enhance, and refine capacities useful in addressing the complex challenges of the world. The current study sought to contribute to leadership education scholarship by studying student motivations to engage in curricular leadership experiences, a topic unexplored until now. Our findings serve as a foundation for the exploration of postsecondary student motivation to enhance the practice and scholarship of leadership education.

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