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DEVELOPING STUDENTS WHO LEAD IN THEIR COMMUNITIES:
A Mixed Methods Case Study of Three Municipal-Based Leadership Programs in the United States

Abstract

While many studies investigate student leadership development in educational contexts or curriculum-based programs, little is known about the efficacy of leadership development programs that emerge in municipalities. This mixed methods case study explored the leadership development of participants in three nine-month youth leadership programs at a municipal-based prevention, treatment, and outreach center in the United States. Qualitative focus groups and quantitative surveys using the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI) were used to collect data at the beginning and end of the three programs along with a post-program evaluative survey. Findings from the qualitative and quantitative analyses are first presented individually and then expressed using a joint display table to visually represent the integrated results. Findings showed that the programs positively influenced participants' perceptions, characteristics, and behaviors as youth leaders in their communities. Participants not only indicated improvements in their leadership practices according to the SLPI from pre- to post-program, but also demonstrated more complex understandings of leadership and what it means to be a leader in one's community. These findings are useful for individuals and organizations planning student leadership development programs and should inform future research in the field.

Keywords: leadership development, youth, municipality, Student Leadership Practices Inventory

Introduction

More than ever, young people around the world are holding prominent leadership roles. Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, and Marley Dias are just a few well-known examples of youth leaders who have demonstrated the potential of young people to make positive change in their communities and society at large. One way that communities, governments, and educational organizations seek to cultivate this potential is through youth leadership development programs. The vast majority of the extant literature on youth leadership development occurs within the boundaries of educational institutions, such as in after-school educational settings (Iachini et al., 2017; Monkman & Proweller, 2016) and higher education (Dugan, 2011; Eich, 2008; Leupold et

al., 2020; Skalicky et al., 2020). As a result of this connection to educational institutions, most leadership development for youth is either curricular (Traini et al., 2021) or co-curricular (Martinez et al., 2020).

While considerable literature exists that studies the impact of youth leadership development programs generally (e.g., Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2016; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999), little is known about how young people are developing as leaders through community and municipal-based leadership development programs, especially those emerging from partnerships with municipalities. Still, existing studies that focused on community-based leadership development highlighted the importance of these opportunities for developing youth leadership, especially through experiential learning and civic engagement (Jones, 2009). Developing youth leadership also brings clear benefits to the communities at large and not just the participating individuals (Libby et al., 2006). Municipalities are of particular interest given their status as administrative governing bodies that can coordinate their efforts in youth leadership development. Whereas typical youth leadership development programs occur within a single educaitonal institution, municipal-based programs can easily reach beyond the boundaries of a single educational institution.

Studying and evaluating these community and municipal-based leadership programs is an important step in understanding how they support leadership development, as well as how leadership experiences within the community shape young people as leaders. However, because municipalities often lack resources to evaluate their programs, little is known about their efficacy. With that in mind, the purpose of this study was to understand and evaluate the leadership development of participants in three nine-month-long youth leadership programs at a municipal-based prevention, treatment, and outreach center in the United States.

The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. How do participants conceptualize the concept of leadership and describe their development as leaders?

2. What change, if any, occurred in participants' leadership characteristics and behaviors over the course of the programs?

3. How, if at all, do participants' perceptions of leadership align with the changes in their leadership characteristics and behaviors?

Methodology

This study employed a mixed methods research methodology, which combined qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis and then integrated results based on both types of data (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Like Marcketti et al. (2011) and Garcia et al. (2017) who utilized mixed methods in leadership development research, a mixed methods design was appropriate for this study given that our aim was not only to evaluate three youth leadership programs but also to understand the participants' conceptualizations of leadership and their perceptions of their development as leaders while participating in the programs. A convergent parallel mixed methods design was employed, meaning that both qualitative and quantitative components of this study were equally central and that data collection and analysis happened concurrently (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This non-experimental case study was largely exploratory and offered an initial understanding of one organization (i.e., the case).

Our philosophical orientation was pragmatic, which is a pluralistic orientation to research focused on real-world practice (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) and common in mixed methods research (Biesta, 2010). Given that the problem this study addressed was one of practice and not of theory, a pragmatic mixed methods approach allowed us to use a variety of methods to answer the research questions. This study was conducted in accordance with the Academy of Human Resource Development's (n.d.) standards on ethics and integrity, and Institutional Review Board approval—including provisions to conduct research with minors—was granted to all researchers.

Participants and Research Site. This study included participants from three separate student leadership development programs (the "Prevention Program," the "Inclusion Program," and the "Senior Program") at a municipal-based prevention, treatment, and outreach center in the United States, hereafter referred to as "Monument." These programs are part of Monument's community outreach efforts. No past experience with substance use or prevention is required—only that prospective participants aspire to model responsible behavior in their community and gain leadership skills. All three programs are free of cost and require students to complete an application process to participate. The three programs operate under a shared leadership model, meaning that the entire team carries out leadership rather than relying on a designated individual (Ensley et al., 2006). Throughout the year, participants collaborate with each other to achieve their group's shared goal.

The goal of the Prevention Program is to lead in the community through the creation of youth substance abuse prevention training for students, parents, and teachers whereas the goal of the Inclusion Group is to facilitate training on inclusion, diversity, and acceptance for the community's youth. These groups develop, practice, and implement engaging training sessions on their respective topics. The Senior Program consists of high school seniors who have completed a year of either the Prevention Program or Inclusion Program. During this program, seniors offer safe and substance-free programming to the community's youth such as a dodgeball tournament, open-mic night, and singing competition. They also participate in municipal board meetings related to substance abuse and other issues concerning young people. All three groups meet on a weekly basis and participate in training in a variety of areas related to the mission of their respective programs and leadership in general. Weekly meetings also provide them the opportunity to plan and organize their activities. As part of Monument's outreach efforts, participants in all three programs are expected to serve as role models in their respective schools and the larger community by refraining from substance use, creating safe spaces for all people, and leading by example. These expectations ensure that all three programs work toward Monument's mission to support substance abuse prevention, treatment, and outreach initiatives.

Given the programs have been offered for over 10 years, students are primarily recruited through word of mouth, considering Monument's reputation in the community, with the aim of having each of the municipality's four high schools represented in each program. Two of the three programs in this study the—Prevention Program and the Inclusion Program—were comprised of a total of 38 high school juniors (ages 16–17). The third program, the Senior Program, was comprised of 24 high school seniors (ages 17–18) (N = 62). The groups who participated in these programs are referred to as the Prevention Group, Inclusion Group, and Senior Group. Each program also had a Monument staff member as a facilitator who led weekly sessions for the program throughout the year. All three programs studied in this research began in August 2019 and ended in May 2020, spanning roughly nine months total. Of the total convenience sample (N = 62), 17 respondents attended public school and 39 attended private school; 42 respondents identified as female and 14 as male, while six respondents did not provide demographic information.

Qualitative Design.

Data Collection. The qualitative data analyzed in this paper were collected through focus group interviews lasting approximately 45 minutes each. Focus groups were conducted with each of the three programs at the beginning of the programs in August (Focus Group 1) and at the completion of the programs in April (Focus Group 2) for a total of six focus groups. All focus groups were recorded and transcribed verbatim and prepared for subsequent analysis, which included formatting, removing identifying information, and creating a codebook using Microsoft Word.

Data Analysis. Once the focus group interviews were transcribed, five of the researchers read through the transcripts to determine the most appropriate type of coding to answer the research questions. Each researcher wrote analytic memos to record initial thoughts and discussed these with the group. At this point, descriptive coding and in vivo coding were applied (Saldaña, 2016). Descriptive coding uses a word or phrase to summarize the primary topic of the

participants' responses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Saldaña, 2016), making it ideal for highlighting key ideas in the participants' responses. In vivo coding uses participants' verbatim words or phrases as codes (Saldaña, 2016) and was advantageous when participant wording was particularly unique and illustrative.

After selecting the coding approach, the qualitative team coded one transcript together (Focus Group 1, Senior Group) as a means of calibrating the team and establishing intercoder reliability. The team used color highlighting in Microsoft Word and tables to create a codebook with codes and their definitions. After coding the first transcript together, each researcher was in charge of applying the established codes to one of the remaining five transcripts and identifying additional codes where necessary. All codes were then discussed across the transcripts, followed by a discussion of emerging categories and themes. By analyzing the frequency and salience of the codes across the transcripts in addressing the research questions, categories emerged around participant definitions of leadership as both a set of actions and a way of being as well as a category related to the importance of overcoming challenges. These were then sharpened into three emergent themes: (a) Good Leadership is Acting Collaboratively and Supportively Toward a Goal, (b) Good Leadership is Being Authentic, Open-Minded, Self-Aware, and Courageous, and (c) Leadership Involves Overcoming Challenges

Quantitative Design.

Data Collection. Quantitative data were collected using identical pre- (before the program) and post-(after the program) assessments using Kouzes and Posner's (2006) Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI). Various models for leadership development have been created for business managers or public-sector organizations, but the SLPI is tailored to student leaders and "identifies specific behaviors and actions that students report using when they are at their 'personal best as leaders'" (Posner, 2012, p. 222). Additionally, the terminology used in the SLPI has been intentionally selected to be appropriate for student populations (Posner, 2012). Using a sample of nearly 78,000 students around the world, Posner (2012) confirmed the

reliability and validity of the SLPI. Thus, the SLPI was an appropriate choice for assessing leadership development in the Monument program participants.

The SLPI includes 30 questions organized under five categories as follows:

- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

The Likert-type items measured the frequency from 1 (rarely) to 5 (very frequently) with which the students reported exhibiting leadership behaviors across the five categories. Students filled out the assessment about themselves at the beginning and end of the program. The facilitators for each group also filled out the observer version of the SLPI for each student one month into the program and at the end of the program. An additional evaluative Then-and-Now survey designed by the researchers was given to the students at the completion of the program, which included 10 questions related to their leadership knowledge and behaviors over the course of the year, as well as an open-ended question about their experiences in the Monument programs. Knowledge questions included items such as "what it means to support my community" and were ranked from "not at all familiar" to "extremely familiar." Behavior questions included items such as "Accepting others regardless of any aspect of their identity" and were ranked from "not true at all" to "very true." This was used in addition to the SLPI to determine how students perceived their own change in learning and behaviors as well as direct commentary about their perceived effectiveness of Monument's programs.

Data Analysis. While the pre-assessments were done on paper, the post-assessments were taken online due to social distance restrictions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in late April 2020. Following a similar analysis done by McKinney and Waite (2016), this study conducted paired sample t-tests for each item to determine if there was a significant difference between pre- and post-assessment scores of the participants' SLPIs and the observers' SLPIs. To do this, the data were input into SPSS software where they were

checked for outliers and assumptions of normality and homogeneity by examining normal probability plots and computing the Levene's test for equal variances. Given the goal of testing two sets of observations completed by the same group of participants and observers, paired sample t-tests were run (Hinkle et al., 2003; Mara & Cribbie, 2012; Skaik, 2015). This procedure was appropriate because data were collected at two specific points in time, which facilitated understanding the changes, if any, in participant leadership practices over the course of the programs from both the perspective of the students themselves and from the program facilitators. Given the non-experimental nature of this study, however, this analysis cannot definitively demonstrate that any changes are the direct result of participation in one of the programs. This point is discussed further below.

Findings

This section presents findings from the qualitative and quantitative analyses individually followed by an integration of the findings using a joint display table to visually represent the unified results.

Qualitative Findings

The qualitative findings from the six focus group interviews included three themes: Good Leadership is Acting Collaboratively and Supportively Toward a Goal; Good Leadership is Being Authentic, Open-Minded, Self-Aware, and Courageous; and, Leadership Involves Overcoming Challenges. Each is discussed below with salient support from the data.

Good Leadership is Acting Collaboratively and Supportively Toward a Goal. During the analysis of participant narratives in the six focus group interviews, the researchers identified 19 codes under the category of the actions related to good leadership. These codes related to actions such as building relationships, engaging others, delegating tasks, managing time, and speaking publicly. When considering all six focus groups, the most prominent and most frequent codes were

accomplishing goals, active listening, communicating effectively, putting others first, collaborating, supporting/helping, taking charge, and problem-solving. Aligning directly with the idea of shared leadership, a key part of good leadership according to the participants was the focus of the leader in guiding followers and teammates in accomplishing a shared goal. In emphasizing the fact that a leader must set goals for themselves and their unit/team, a member of the Prevention Group suggested that "a leader is like a trusted individual that understands the common goal and tries to help a group of people get to the goal" (Focus Group 2). Similarly, a student from the Senior Group said, "A leader is someone who takes it upon themselves to solve a problem or guide a group of people to solve some issue" (Focus Group 2).

The participants went on to discuss strategies leaders employ with their teams in the pursuit of these goals. Some of the more prominent strategies discussed were active listening and communicating effectively, which often appeared together. One member of the Inclusion Group described active listening by saying:

Listening to what others have to say, but then also taking their opinions and taking their suggestions and then making something out of it. So, it's not just, "Okay, yes, now I heard what you have to say, but I'm still going to do my own thing." It's incorporating other people's ideas into the final result. (Focus Group 1)

This student emphasized the importance of taking others' opinions into account. While the participants from the first focus groups suggested that active listening helps leaders grow as they obtain information that contributes to making informed decisions, students in the second set of focus groups at the end of the program went further to discuss strategies of becoming an active listener. A member of the Inclusion Group encapsulates this finding by stating the following:

I don't know if you've heard of leaning in, but people who I can see are really engaged in a conversation and people who...if someone says something, it's the people who ask the follow-up questions and are really trying to get to know how that person is feeling and that kind of thing. So, I guess, I see a leader in a social context as someone who really cares, someone who's really passionate about whatever is being discussed. (Focus Group 2)

As this quote illustrates, much of the data revealed this theme of good leadership as a matter of behaviors or actions.

While reflecting on the components of good leadership, the students also suggested putting others first as admirable leadership behavior. Such a leader was described as "someone who makes sacrifices even when it doesn't benefit them, on behalf of the team" (Senior Group, Focus Group 1). In the second Inclusion Group focus group, a student used a metaphor to describe a leader who puts others first and stated that "a leader is someone who sets the stage for others to shine and allows everyone else's talent and ideas to be heard and seen and sets the stage for everyone else – and not taking up the spotlight." While a one-to-one comparison cannot be made, this set of two quotes exemplified how meaning making about good leadership evolved from the beginning of the program.

As the students referred to teams led by good leaders, they stressed the importance of collaboration and why good leaders should facilitate it. The participants thought that good leaders are those who motivate their team members to collaborate and contribute equally, instead of being dominant and trying to control the situation. Collaboration was also deemed important because of the benefit of learning through collaboration and from team members. A participant stated that a leader may not be the most knowledgeable or the wisest person on the team, but that "a leader pulls together people from different professions that probably have higher skills than the leader to work on something common that one cannot possibly achieve [alone]" (Inclusion Group, Focus Group 2). Once again, the focus was on action (i.e., collaborating) to achieve the common goal.

Similarly, participants in Monument's programs also acknowledged the importance of leaders supporting or helping the team. While the Prevention Group was the only group to mention this in the first focus group interview, this code appeared in the second focus group interviews for all three groups. Participants identified that good leaders play an active role in supporting and helping their team in their attempt to achieve their goal. One participant summed this up as, "instead of telling people the goal and what to do to reach that goal, they help them reach the goal" (Prevention Group, Focus Group 1). This student emphasized the importance of what a leader does for their team.

The idea of taking charge was another key code in this category and emerged in reference to a leader's role in problem-solving. The students felt it necessary for a good leader to take action, defining such a leader as a "person who steps up and fights through adversity and takes charge and tries to lead the people out of the struggles or the adversity instead of just rolling over and accepting it" (Prevention Group, Focus Group 2). The emphasis here was on actively working for the good of the team. Thus, moving forward towards the goal without losing other people or their perspectives was an important component in this theme. That said, leadership was not always seen as grand gestures. As one participant explained,

Small or easy things that may not seem like a big deal to us can really have a huge impact on other people, especially thinking about all the workshops we did. We may not even know how many people we affected, and we might not even think about them that much. (Prevention Group, Focus Group 2)

This quote captures a common sentiment among participants that seemingly insignificant acts can profoundly impact the people and municipality they serve.

Good Leadership is Being Authentic, Open-Minded, Self-Aware, and Courageous. The coding and analysis process yielded 18 codes that aligned with what it means to be a leader, which were further defined as referring to leadership qualities. Most common, even at the beginning of the year, was the focus on authenticity. One participant explained:

Who someone is truly and who they really are at the heart is the determining factor of everything: what they do, what they push for, how they treat others, how they lead…it determines whether they are able to be a good leader and what kind of qualities they put forward in that leadership position. (Inclusion Group, Focus Group 1)

The idea of being authentic also related to being vulnerable and opening up to others about problems or difficult subjects. Students mentioned that vulnerability can make leaders more relatable to others and introduce growth opportunities. One student shared that being vulnerable allowed them to embrace who they are,

stating, "There was a moment where I was super vulnerable about something that before then I was kind of nervous about. And since that time, I've been really able to own my identity" (Inclusion Group, Focus Group 2).

Each focus group also discussed the importance of being open-minded and respectful of others' differences. The participants repeatedly acknowledged that leaders must be willing to listen to other people's perspectives. One participant stated, "The best way to show your respect for someone is to listen to them and keep an open mind and just take into consideration another person's perspective, even if it doesn't align with yours" (Senior Group, Focus Group 2). In addition to demonstrating respect for others by having an open mind, the students also noted that leaders earn respect from others when they are open-minded.

Along with recognizing and accepting other people's varying viewpoints, the participants emphasized the importance of being self-aware. During the focus groups, several participants spoke about their strengths and weaknesses as well as recognized that leaders must be aware of their personal biases. One student explained, "a leader is someone who is conscious of how their actions affect others and are perceived by others" (Senior Group, Focus Group 2). In this example, the participants once again referred to the importance of considering the team when describing leadership.

Similarly, all three groups mentioned courage, defined as becoming more comfortable taking action or speaking up. One participant observed that leaders often have to take action when they are not sure of the outcome. Another student described how the Monument's leadership programs helped them develop this trait, and reported, "I became more confident to the point where I am not afraid to… offer my input or offer to take charge of certain things" (Senior Group, Focus Group 2). Part of being courageous was also described as recognizing one's areas for growth. A member of Prevention Group noted, "I think that going through the year [in this program], and also my other classes, I learned that not knowing the answer to everything is a good thing because it just leaves room for growth" (Prevention Group, Focus Group 2).

While these commonalities emerged, it was also clear in the data that the participants, particularly in the

second focus groups, saw leadership as a complex phenomenon. According to one participant, "Something that I've learned is how leadership could come in many different forms and how people of all ages can be leaders… it comes in so many different varieties, and it's not just one set standard" (Inclusion Group, Focus Group 2). From their experiences, the participants acknowledged that leadership could manifest in multiple ways and expanded their idea of who can be a leader throughout the programs.

Leadership Involves Overcoming Challenges. The theme that leadership involves overcoming challenges was evident in all three of the second round of focus groups. While aspects of overcoming challenges relate to the first two themes, over 60 pieces of dialogue were coded in relation to this theme, which led us to categorize it as separate from the others. When considering possible obstacles to their personal development, participants mentioned fear, specifically fear of new situations, failure, or simply making mistakes. Other potential obstacles to their personal development included staying organized, being inclusive of everyone on the team, balancing responsibilities and time, managing personal biases, over-relying on previous experiences, and coping with the shift to a virtual environment (due to the COVID-19 pandemic). Interestingly, the Senior Group, which included high school seniors, is the only group that considered life balance or organization as a potential obstacle. This difference could be due to the additional priorities and stresses of seniors (graduation, college, etc.) versus juniors in the other groups. One participant recognized the inevitability of mistakes when they stated, "obviously there will be mistakes made, but the best way to improve from mistakes is to learn from them" (Senior Group, Focus Group 1). This showed their focus on development and growth when faced with obstacles.

Related to overcoming obstacles was the importance of learning from mistakes or failures, which was mentioned 13 times. Participants shared personal experiences learning from their own mistakes or watching leaders they respected learn from mistakes or adjust after failures to eventually succeed. During the focus groups, one participant noted, "a good leader will accept failure and understand when something is not working and try to rectify the situation, as opposed to just continuing the

disaster the way it started" (Inclusion Group, Focus Group 1). This was related to the description of a leader as someone who "takes charge."

Similarly, there were eight mentions of leaders being resilient when facing obstacles. For example, good leaders are not discouraged by failure but remain focused on the goal or task at hand. Several participants mentioned the importance of leaders being able to rely on their team for support through the obstacle as well as demonstrating humility. Additionally, participants noted the role of open-mindedness and the ability to take a step back, breathe, and think logically before moving forward. Though the fear of being perceived as weak was considered, participants in three focus groups mentioned that good leaders embrace fear or mistakes. In the first interview with the Prevention Group, participants mentioned confidence as an appropriate response to obstacles. Specifically believing in oneself and personal abilities to overcome, they explained, "If a leader believes in themselves enough then that can override any fear they might have because they are so passionate about what their goal is."

Lastly, Senior and Prevention Group participants mentioned the significance of communication through obstacles. The participants felt that communicating through obstacles ensures fairness and inclusion amongst team members and is a way for the leader to ask for help or come to the realization that they are not alone. Although obstacles or failures seem inevitable, the participants' responses primarily focused on overcoming or learning from those mistakes. As one student leader expressed, "one of my biggest takeaways from this year was that messing up and making mistakes doesn't define a leader, it doesn't define me" (Prevention Group, Focus Group 2). Once again, this demonstrated the role that Monument's programs had in supporting these students to develop their leadership skills.

Quantitative Findings

Participants' SLPI Results. Participants' responses to the SLPI pre- and post-assessment can be viewed in Table 1. The paired sample t-test indicated a statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level (two-tailed) for 21 of the 30 practices. Paired sample correlations indicated statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level for the

practices holding others accountable and expresses vision (see Table 1).

Table 1
Self-Pre-Post Assessment Results

Criteria	Peer Review Question Prompts
1. Conviction	Identify the rhetorical devices the writer has used. Are they in the best place in terms of emphasis? Where or how might they be better used?
2. Rhetoric	Describe the structure of the letter. Where are there places where you became confused? Explain where these were and why they were confusing.
3. Structure	Describe the overall tone of the letter. Is it consistent? How is it appropriate or inappropriate given the relationship between the writer and the intended audience?
4. Tone	Identify and explain any potential fallacies in logic or loaded language.
5. Additional Language	Identify whether the writer has established common ground with his/her audience. Is it convincing? What is missing?
6. Common Ground	Where is information unnecessarily repeated or awkwardly stated? Is the writer telling the intended audience something they already know? If so, do they make clear why they are doing this?
7. Clarity	If you noticed any grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors, what were they? What are the main strengths of the draft?"

Instructors can assign grades and provide feedback to students based on their return letter to their peer (5 points possible). Once students receive the feedback from their peers, they are encouraged to edit their first draft letter to redirect their writing to achieve the goals of the Eloquent Letter assignment.

Peer Review Feedback. One example of grading commentary given to students by an instructor in the course was:

> *Thank you for your peer review of [student's name] letter. Your response letter was specific and useful. I found your use of questions and specific examples to be very effective in providing feedback and ideas for improvements. Additionally, throughout your response letter you provided positive examples from [student's name] letter and areas for improvement. This type of feedback is useful for [student's name] to know where to focus her thinking and writing. I think the feedback you provided [student's name] will help her make adjustments that will encourage her and the energy company to find common ground.*

Final Eloquent Letter Assignment Grading Rubric. Overall, the Eloquent Letter assignment makes up 40 of the 860 total points in the course (5% of the student's overall course grade). The Eloquent Letter peer exchange is worth 5 points, the student reflective Articulation Post is worth 5 points and the final draft of the Eloquent letter is worth 30 points. Table 2 outlines the Eloquent Letter rubric which provides the criteria and descriptions of the assignment criteria. The rubric is provided to students at the beginning of the assignment. The learning objective for week 3 is, by the end of the week students should be able to analyze social, political, and economic influences on their chosen policy issue by reading, reflecting, and dialoguing about potential influences. The 3 criteria described as proposed solution and argument claim, ethical use of sources, and evidence and reasoning help the instructor and student assess progress on the parts of the weekly learning objective related to analyzing and reflecting on the influences on their chosen policy issue. The 3 criteria described as context and purpose of writing, common ground, and style and readability help the instructor and student

assess progress on the part of the weekly learning objective related to dialoguing with the letter recipient about the potential influences.

Table 2
Prompts to Address in Peer Review Letter

PTS	Criteria	Peer Review Question Prompts
5	**1. Conviction**	Identify the rhetorical devices the writer has used. Are they in the best place in terms of emphasis? Where or how might they be better used?
5	**2. Rhetoric**	Describe the structure of the letter. Where are there places where you became confused? Explain where these were and why they were confusing.
5	**3. Structure**	Describe the overall tone of the letter. Is it consistent? How is it appropriate or inappropriate given the relationship between the writer and the intended audience?
5	**4. Tone**	Identify and explain any potential fallacies in logic or loaded language.
5	**5. Additional Language**	Identify whether the writer has established common ground with his/her audience. Is it convincing? What is missing?
5	**6. Common Ground**	Where is information unnecessarily repeated or awkwardly stated? Is the writer telling the intended audience something they already know? If so, do they make clear why they are doing this?
5	**7. Clarity**	If you noticed any grammatical, punctuation, or spelling errors, what were they? What are the main strengths of the draft?"

Each of the criteria are evaluated on a scale of excellent (5 pts) to no marks (0 pts), with the flexibility to allow instructors to indicate partial point deductions within that range for each criterion. Instructors utilize the criteria descriptions to look for the inclusion of each of the described elements within the students' eloquent letter. For example, for the criterion context and purpose of writing the instructor will look for the students' eloquent letter to be addressed to a specific person, organization, or association, if the letter is addressed to an audience that is too broad or who does not have a stake in the policy issue points would be deducted. Additionally, the instructor will look for appropriate rhetorical choices that demonstrate the set of methods the student used to identify with the proposed recipient of the letter and demonstrate to the instructor the student is trying to understand things from another's perspective. These rhetorical choices can be related to the tone of the language used, specific references to the audience's experience, knowledge, and values; and/or historical and current context provided to acknowledge the setting in which the letter is being written and considered. If the letter does not include words or phrases that demonstrate these types of rhetorical choices points would be deducted accordingly. Each group of students are different in how they approach the assignment, however, the following examples of feedback and lessons learned may be helpful for leadership education instructors to consider as they help guide students through this assignment.

Final Draft Eloquent Letter Feedback. The three instructors in the different sections of the course chose different paths when grading and evaluating the final drafts of the Eloquent Letter assignment. One instructor assigned 30 out of 30 points for all students in the course, while the other instructors graded the assignment with point distributions ranging from 28.1 to 29.6 points (all A's) and 24.9 to 29.7 points (range from A's to B's). Two of the three instructors provided specific comments and questions to students within the body of the letter in addition to different degrees of summative grading commentary. One example of grading commentary provided by one of the instructors on the final draft of the Eloquent Letter assignment was:

Thank you for your heartfelt and compelling letter. The framing and focus you have chosen is important. There is some excellent work by Ibram X. Kendi on anti-racism that I think might help support your focus on the systems and policies that are creating inequities. Good job acknowledging that these systems were not put in place intentionally, that works well to help build common ground. I would have liked to see you use a metaphor. This type of rhetorical device really helps shake people from their usual way of thinking and for your CEO recipient may be very useful in helping you communicate the need and call to action. Keep up the excellent writing. [29.4/30]

Discussion of Outcomes and Implications

The descriptions included in this paper covered five course sections that were taught during the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters while the COVID-19 pandemic was underway. During the pandemic, many colleges adopted pass/fail grading policies that students could request for their overall course grade. While many campuses dropped these adaptations later in the academic year, the pandemic may have a lasting impact on how we as leadership educators think about grading assignments. For example, as noted for this doctoral-level interdisciplinary course, three distinct faculty used identical rubrics to facilitate the grading of this single assignment. For one faculty member, this assignment was graded as pass/fail, no points were deducted on any of the criteria for all parts of the

assignment. For the other two faculty members, this assignment was graded in a more nuanced way, with points deducted and constructive feedback provided related to the criteria in which points were deducted to help the students continue to grow.

Leadership educators considering using rubrics in multi-section courses with distinct faculty instructors will want to orient faculty to the use of rubrics and discuss the implications and outcomes of different grading practices. In the context of our interdisciplinary doctoral program, within which this course was offered, faculty are given latitude to use instructional strategies, including grading practices, consistent with their teaching philosophy which often has discipline-specific roots. Attempts to standardize faculty within an interdisciplinary program would be counterproductive to the spirit of interdisciplinary learning. However, effective interdisciplinary teaching and learning instructional practices are not unique from any other forms of productive teaching and learning practices (Dezure, 2017). Therefore, leadership educators whether in an interdisciplinary program or not, may benefit from paying attention to students' demonstration of their abilities to analyze problems from several perspectives, compare and contrast, critically analyze resources, place problems and solutions within a larger context, articulate critical points, empathize with multiple perspectives and stakeholders, and tolerate ambiguity and complexity (Dezure, 2017). Whether leadership educators provide feedback to students on these critical abilities via grading commentary by using the rubric or through group and one-on-one discussions, the important point is that students receive feedback from their instructor that helps to strengthen their policy advocacy skills and their selection of and dialogue with identified stakeholders.

One way we distinguish the Eloquent Letter from other forms of writing is to remind students that the assignment is not an objective, esoteric approach to writing a policy analysis report, but is a personal letter intended to persuade an audience. Students inevitably write the first draft of their letter as a persuasive essay: "writer-based" prose, largely ignoring the audience and focusing on the claims, evidence, and appeals they themselves find most convincing. Students believe their goal is to "win the argument" and unfortunately will often focus too much on facts and figures instead of building bridges and working towards compromise. Therefore, peer reviewers are encouraged to look for evidence of

these traps in the draft letters. Additionally, when students during their own peer reviews see how their peers have completed the assignment, they are able to see with fresh eyes the mistakes they may have made in their own letter and are able to correct these in their final draft.

In week 8 of the course students shared their reactions to the overall course, including the Eloquent Letter assignment, in their final reflection post. We found that students were transformed by the assignment based on their own assessment of their learning. Due to the reflective nature of the video posts the submissions were not graded, rather a mark of complete was assigned along with the 5 points. The impact of the Eloquent Letter assignment seemed to carry on even after the assignment was completed in week 4. In their final reflection students were asked to respond to a few of the following questions using a video post:

- How have these assignments influenced your identity?

- What were the important milestones in your process of writing the Eloquent Letter or the policy proposal paper? For instance, how did you choose your topic and the audience, what research was important to how you wrote and rewrote your letter and how you wrote your policy proposal paper?

- What were (at least two) challenges or discoveries you made during your process of writing these assignments?

- What were the most significant changes you made between different drafts of each paper? What feedback from your peer evaluation did you use?

- How/what knowledge or skills obtained during this course/process will you apply in your future coursework/career/life?

In their articulation post videos some students highlighted that the writing of the eloquent letter was one of the major milestones for them in the course. Some students mentioned becoming more aware of their writing process and their differing levels of comfort with a new type of writing for them. In fact, several students indicated that prior to this assignment they felt more comfortable writing a research paper rather than a letter. One student specifically mentioned feedback they had

received from their peer reviewer about their use of the word "your" in their eloquent letter. The student had used the word "your" to acknowledge that they were writing for a specific audience, however, their peer gave them feedback that the use of "your" came across as blame, which helped the student to consider tone and connection with their audience even more.

In the week 8 articulation posts some students also noted that because of this course, and the Eloquent Letter assignment, they were more aware of their identity and the identity of others. One student noted, 'the assignments were not just valuable in and of themselves, but also in what they have aroused in me.' Additionally, several students indicated that the Eloquent Letter assignment opened their eyes to their own biases and perspectives and pushed them to be more curious in order to get to the root of the policy problem. Subsequently, students experienced one of the largest lessons related to identifying the appropriate audience. After choosing their policy issue/problem, some students expressed that they felt the most push and pull when clarifying and homing in on their audience. One student included the following quote from Maya Angelo in their Eloquent Letter, "Without courage we cannot practice any other virtue with consistency. We can't be kind, true, merciful, generous, or honest." In their articulation post the student acknowledged that the inclusion of the quote was not just for her audience's benefit, but for her own as well.

When students were asked what elements of the online course content and course environment they found to be particularly useful to achieving the course objectives, two students specifically mentioned the Eloquent Letter. In addition, feedback on the course evaluations completed at the end of the course included comments regarding the assignment:

"The Eloquent Letter assignment was an interesting exercise, and provided a unique experience as both a writer and peer-reviewer."

"It was an interesting experience doing the policy paper and eloquent letter.

"I enjoyed reading MLK's Letter from a Birmingham Jail. I had never read it."

Conclusion and Recommendations

Although this specific assignment is roughly 5% of the overall course grade, leadership educators can easily increase the percentage and spread the assignment out as necessary across the term. Additionally, while we have adapted this assignment for doctoral students, it was originally adopted from undergraduate curriculum and can easily be used across undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral level programs.

When drawing conclusions about this assignment's application, one should consider what makes it challenging for students. Based on our interactions with students and observations of their work, including their self-reflections, we found that audience identification and orienting students toward collective problem solving rather than debate, were two of the biggest challenges. Additionally, issues related to rhetorical decisions based on the audience, for example finding a metaphor that communicated the complexity of the situation, was also a challenge. Instructors may want to use critical questions when giving feedback on drafts or to scaffold instruction to include discussions or activities related to rhetorical choices, i.e., tone and register of language, types and sources of evidence, and identifying shared warrants for arguments. For example, a discussion of Dr. King's letter could include attention to his use of metaphor and appeals/evidence as targeted to the intended audience and consider questions about how these were particularly effective given that audience. Students might also brainstorm and workshop metaphors for the problems or issues being considered in the course content.

As mentioned earlier, though the letter is a ubiquitous form that our students likely encounter on a regular basis, e.g., emails, letters to the editor, and published open letters, they may have had limited, if any formal instruction related to the conventions and rhetorical considerations of the form. It is helpful to draw students' attention to these and the ways letters may differ from other forms and genres; for instance, letters are generally short, so revision should focus on concision. Subsequently it is useful to provide examples of persuasive letters, such as Dr. King's. Instructors may want to start collecting letters they encounter for this purpose. In the undergraduate course where this assignment originated, examples include an open letter to President Obama from Natives in America regarding DAPL (2016), a letter to the editor of the Boston Globe on finding common ground in the abortion debate (Merullo, 2013), a letter written by Daneen Bergland to the local school board, and exemplary letters by previous students. New and timely examples become available every day; indeed, a quick internet search brings up a letter from the Student Body President and Trustee, Lamar Richards (2021), to students of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill regarding racism, an open letter from college professors to the U.S. Senate supporting the For the People Act voting rights bill (James & Evans, n.d.), and an encyclical letter Laudato Si' from Pope Francis to the world calling on care for our common home (2015). These few, but easily accessible examples further impress that the letter is still an important advocacy and communication tool that leadership educators can incorporate into a multitude of leadership development courses if they seek to provide a unique experiential learning opportunity.

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