

THE HIDDEN LEADERSHIP CURRICULUM: Alumni Perspectives on the Leadership Lessons Gained Through Co-Curricular Engagement

Abstract

Co-curricular engagement in postsecondary education provides students with a breadth of opportunity for leadership-focused developmental experiences. However, few studies have qualitatively examined in detail how alumni describe years later how formal co-curricular involvement contributes to their development. Such lack of attention has resulted in what we describe as a “hidden leadership curriculum” embedded in co-curricular engagement. To address this gap in the literature, we explored the leadership experiences of 25 recent alumni who were engaged within various co-curricular organizations, and the leadership lessons relevant to their professional success that they report learning as a direct result of their involvement. Findings from this study reveal how the inherent organizational challenges embedded within co-curricular engagements lead students to develop a more interdependent, relational conception of effective leadership behaviors. These conceptualizations place value on collective group engagement and decision-making, and help students recognize group needs over individual desires. In addition, many participants reported acquiring the value of generativity – building a leadership pipeline - within their respective co-curricular organizations. We discuss practical implications, such as the central role of challenging experiences within the co-curriculum, and suggest future research recommendations.

Introduction

Several decades of academic scholarship have been dedicated to examining the co-curriculum in postsecondary education – essentially, the avenues for students to become involved within their campus community outside of the academic courses and

programs in which they are enrolled – and student development. Despite such long-standing focus, issues persist in understanding the relationship between these two concepts. For example, many studies fail to rigorously define the co-curriculum, and inadvertently conflate it with academic engagement outside of a strict classroom boundary

(e.g., visiting an instructor outside of class; organizing a study group to prepare for an exam) (Wolf-Wendel, et al., 2009). Other studies employ generalized measures of student learning (e.g., Keeling, 2004; Kuh, 1995) as outcomes, thus dampening the ability to understand particular aspects of student growth outside of academic contexts. Yet other researchers examine the relationship between co-curricular involvement and student retention (e.g., Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), positioning these outcomes, in part, as proxies for student development at best. In this study, we focused specifically on what we define as “formal” co-curricular engagement – that is, activities that are explicitly initiated and supported by campus administrators that are not directly connected to academic experiences. Examples of these types of “formal,” but non-curricular, engagement include student organizations, intramural and campus-supported sports, and campus employment opportunities. Within these activities, we specifically focused on student leadership capacity growth reported by recent alumni who were involved within them. Our findings are designed to illustrate how student participants make sense of the relationship between their involvement and their development.

Co-curricular Involvement: A Hidden Leadership Curriculum. Student involvement within a co-curriculum in higher education has existed almost as long as universities have existed (Rosch & Collins, 2017). However, it may be surprising how disorganized the scholarship of student co-curricular involvement has been when such involvement is separated from engagement in formal academic experiences (Vetter, et al., 2019). Such disorganization might be explained by the significant breadth of experiences that could be defined as “co-curricular” – for example, student organizations, community service initiatives, student on-campus employment, fraternities and sororities, intramural, club, and varsity sports, and numerous other avenues can be included. Just as broad is the depth to which students may become involved. One student might dedicate several hours a week to their student organization while another might spend less than an hour a month simply attending that organization’s meetings. Given such diversity of experiences, research strongly suggests that

involvement, in general, is “good,” but fails to delineate the specific lessons that students might take from their experiences (Suskie, 2015). Moreover, while some qualitative studies delineate how specific populations of students grow from specific types of co-curricular involvement (e.g., Quaye, et al., 2019), few studies exist that examine how involvement is related to student growth and learning. Said another way, when students choose to enroll in a class, they often have access to information that states how that class will inform their learning. When they join a student club, however, explicit messages regarding the results of joining are much rarer (Dean, 2015). And while studies do exist that have been conducted over the past 20 years that examine such learning (e.g., Sessa, et al., 2014), they by and large have not translated how administrators communicate the value of co-curricular engagement. Such lack of information results in an institution’s co-curricular portfolio comprising a “hidden curriculum” of lessons and learning. This study is designed to illustrate some of those lessons and processes of learning, organizing the perspectives of a diverse group of recent alumni regarding how they made sense of their learning to effectively lead as an undergraduate student.

In the context of this study, we frame the concept of “co-curricular involvement” founded in Astin’s (1984) definition of “physical and psychic energy” that students dedicate to an endeavor. However, we create a boundary between “formal” experiences that are explicitly influenced within the administration of a university education and “informal” experiences that might occur in any social setting. For example, university administrators have long supported formal student organizations by creating policies that govern their creation and oversight, dedicate space for these organizations to achieve their goals, and often assign university staff to support their success. We define these as “formal” experiences specifically designed, at least in part, for student leadership development. By contrast, students might report how beneficial informal conversations over dinner with peers might be to their growth and development. Campus administrators have limited ability to influence the shape and direction of these conversations beyond setting the menu. Moreover, these conversations might just as easily occur in settings that have nothing to do with a

university-specific context. For these reasons, we define these more ambiguous experiences as “informal” in relation to a university’s role in supporting them to contribute to student leadership development. Within this study, we attempted to focus specifically on “formal” co-curricular student experiences where the shape and direction of these experiences could be directly influenced by university administrators and faculty.

Models of Student Leadership Learning and Development.

To focus on what students take away from their formal co-curricular experiences, we first review how we define leadership development and the process of learning how to lead. Most contemporary leadership scholars describe the concept of leadership in modern society from a “post-industrial” perspective. There, the processes of leadership are interdependently enacted by members in relationship to their groups, where individual positionality is less significant than the state of the relationships between individuals, and where the goals of leading are to create positive change and behave with a sense of ethical values that benefit the group and community as a whole (Rost, 1991). Models of leadership development aligned with a post-industrial perspective have been created and employed specifically for educating college students, such as the Social Change Model of Leadership Development (HERI, 1996), that focus on the interaction of individuals, groups, and communities, and how students need to develop capacity to operate as individuals, group members, and citizens in a larger society (Astin, 1996). The Relational Leadership Model (Komives, et al., 1998) represents another popular model for college students, where the goal is to help students develop a framework for leading that is process-oriented, purposeful, inclusive, empowering of others, and ethical in nature. While most leadership educators within universities found their curriculum on these models and similar ones (Owen, 2012), research suggests that most students do not begin their higher education possessing a mental model of leadership aligned with a post-industrial perspective (Komives et al., 2006).

Prior research suggests, however, that many undergraduate students hold beliefs that leadership stems from possessing formal positions in

organizations and where individuals occupying those positions influence their organizations through providing direction and structure (Komives et al., 2006). Even students who were currently engaged in formal leadership education possess disorganized and often conflicting views of what effective leadership entails (Rosch & Collier, 2016). Relatively clear misalignment exists between what scholars suggest effective leadership is and what research on current university students suggest these students believe about effective leadership practices. The misalignment indicates a need to focus on the process of learning that students employ during their postsecondary education experiences.

To help illustrate processes by which students might develop a perspective of leading more aligned with these models, Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) described a model of student leadership learning where components primarily consist of observing others, engaging in formal or informal training, engaging in activities that require students to behave in a leadership capacity, and reflecting on their leadership development. Formal co-curricular experiences, the focus of this particular study, represent a potentially fruitful setting for such learning, where students join these experiences and often observe the leadership behaviors of others and through active engagement over time, becoming more formal leaders themselves.

Assessing Recent Alumni. Research in the past decade focused on student leadership development suggests that growth is not linear, nor is it always positive (Day & Sin, 2011; Rosch, et al., 2017), especially in the context of co-curricular involvement (Rosch & Collins, 2019). Yet most research in leadership learning employs a data collection process limited to the time period of active participation (Rosch, 2018). A potentially helpful population for studies that examine the outcomes and impact of leadership learning over time could be alumni who have since graduated (Beatty, et al., 2021). Employing alumni-focused studies also possesses the additional benefit that these former students have moved on to full-time employment, and therefore possess perspectives embedded in professional and adult community settings – in other words, the settings for which postsecondary education is designed to help students prepare

(Seemiller, 2021). Indeed, in the past decade, scholars (e.g., Saunders-Smiths & DeGraff, 2012) focused on discipline-specific learning outcomes have begun utilizing participants that have already completed their education and were currently professionally employed. A few researchers have begun to tap alumni in the field of leadership education (Beatty, et al., 2021; Egan, et al., 2020). Utilizing alumni currently engaged in professional settings to share their perspectives could inform scholars and campus administrators on the process and outcomes of their leadership-focused learning in co-curricular settings, and how each are relevant to their professional success.

Research Study Objectives. Our overall objective in this research study was to interview recent graduates who have attained a bachelor's degree and were currently employed in professional settings. Our goal was to analyze themes in what they shared to help deepen our understanding of the learning processes embedded within formal co-curricular engagement opportunities, and to better understand the specific outcomes that might result from such engagement.

Methods

Study Design. We utilized semi-structured interviews to develop a common framework for analyzing key aspects of our participants' leadership experiences while providing them the freedom to expound upon their unique developmental experiences (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). This study provided participants with an opportunity to share detailed accounts of salient leadership lessons learned from their participation in formal co-curricular contexts throughout their post-secondary education experience.

Sample. We interviewed recent alumni from a large, research-intensive, Mid-Western, public university who graduated between 2015 and 2019. Based on this selection criteria, 1,002 potential participants were identified by the campus's institutional advancement office as having participated in a leadership program hosted by the campus's co-curricular leadership center at some time during their undergraduate experience. While these

programs were not the focus of this study, we deemed this population of current alumni to possess a potentially elevated interest in the topic of leadership, and therefore more likely to respond to invitations to participate in an interview. Recruitment for this study began with alumni from the 2019 graduate cohort and consisted of sending personalized emails, LinkedIn messages, and invitations from campus administrators and faculty. Recruitment efforts continued through the 2018 to 2015 graduate cohort until data analysis suggested that sample had been appropriately saturated. Among the potential participants, 25 individuals were selected for their responsiveness to recruitment efforts, completion of a demographic survey, and willingness to schedule and participate in a follow-up interview.

We collected participant graduation year, as well as race and gender identity data. Of the 25 study participants, ten graduated in 2019, 13 in 2018, one in 2016, and one in 2015. We collected participant graduation year, as well as gender and racial identity data, as both identities have been shown in several past studies to influence leadership perspectives (see, for example, Owen (2020) and Dugan, et al., (2012) for summaries of such research on gender and racial identities, respectively). Thirteen participants identified as Caucasian/White, six as LatinX/Hispanic, four as Asian American, and two as African American/Black. Eighteen individuals identified as a woman, and seven identified as a man. Six participants identified as first-generation college students. Twenty-four participants identified as heterosexual, and one participant identified as bisexual.

Procedures. Our semi-structured interview protocol was designed to investigate the process by which recent alumni report learning leadership lessons through their engagement in the co-curriculum. We guided our participants to self-identify their involvement in various co-curricular contexts, with participants reporting involvement in registered student organizations, on-campus employment and internship opportunities, fraternities and sororities, and club and intramural sports affiliations. Within these co-curricular contexts, we asked participants to identify their own process of student leadership development loosely falling within four thematic

areas, specifically how their involvement may or may not have led to: increased self-knowledge, development of skills creating and sustaining interpersonal relationships, development of competence leading groups and organizations, and increased engagement within wider societal and community settings. All interviews were conducted through video conference with one member of the research team and lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. Audio and video recordings were made of each interview for further analysis.

Data Analysis. All interviews were initially transcribed through an electronic transcription software, then manually edited and assessed for accuracy by a member of the research team. After transcribing the interviews, two members of the research team independently coded the transcripts for emergent thematic categories using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After completing the initial stage of analysis using open coding, the research team analyzed and compared emergent thematic categories independently identified by each coder, noting numerous categorical commonalities arising from the data, including such categories as student-led clubs, fraternities and sororities, intramural/club/varsity sports, on-campus employment, among many others. During the third stage of analysis, two members of the research team used thematic analysis to identify repeated patterns of learning within the emergent thematic categories and participant transcripts (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Furthermore, during this stage, analysis of individual participant transcripts was conducted via research memos to identify pathways of leadership development through various co-curricular contexts. In the final stage of analysis, two members of the research team reviewed and revised thematic categories, delineating parameters of final thematic categories by clearly defining the patterns of learning articulated through participant excerpts. The combined analysis of the emergent thematic categories and research memos represent the foundation of our findings.

Positionality. We offer a brief statement regarding how our collective positionalities have informed our research efforts. One member of the research team

identifies as a White cisgender man who serves as a research-based faculty member and has extensive experience advising student organizations. Another member identifies as a Black cisgender man who studies the sociology of gender and race as a faculty member. A third member identifies as a White cisgender woman who serves as a student affairs administrator responsible for leadership education initiatives. A fourth member is a current graduate student who was recently engaged in co-curricular initiatives as a participant, and identifies as a White cisgender man. These historical connections to the topic and context informed how we advertised this study to alumni, communicated with our participants, as well as how it guided our coding and analyses. Our core beliefs, given our collective backgrounds, is that higher education can serve as a tool for student leadership capacity growth, that the co-curriculum is likely a factor in shaping this tool, and that students from different backgrounds may experience different trajectories and specific factors that shape such growth.

Results

By and large, our participants have articulated that the leadership lessons learned through their involvement in myriad co-curricular organizations have helped them shift their understanding of leadership from a concept based on organizational position and unidirectional influence to one based more on reciprocal influence and organizational interdependence. While the pathways leading our participants to experience these leadership lessons are unique to each individual, the underlying structure of the leadership lessons remain largely similar. Herein, our findings suggest that our respondents' co-curricular leadership experiences led them to learn that: 1) The practice of leadership is an interdependent process, not a behavior or series of behaviors undertaken by a single individual directed at a group. 2) The needs of the group are greater than the needs of any one individual, which require effective group members to relinquish self-centric behaviors to accomplish group goals. 3) Leaders possess a responsibility to prepare the way for others to succeed. These leadership lessons, expressed in the words of our respondents, now serve as the basis for our analysis.

Leadership as an Interdependent Process: “I couldn’t do everything on my own.” Our participants were involved in very diverse types of experiences, ranging from sports teams to clubs to Greek-letter organizations, yet similar themes emerged regarding the shape of their leadership learning. For many of our participants, the complexities of their leadership experiences presented them with opportunities to learn that leadership is not an independent action of one formal leader towards a group of followers, but rather, an interdependent relational process that emerges within a group to achieve common goals. In this segment of our analysis, we focus on this common experience, and how our participants described the process through which their engagement in formal co-curricular initiatives (i.e., those with explicit ties to campus administration and/or advising) challenged them to incorporate a more interdependent and collaborative approach to leadership. Preslie, who identifies as a White woman who graduated two years prior to being interviewed, shares a particularly challenging growth experience while serving as captain of the university cheer team that fundamentally altered her way of operating as a leader:

I think that there were a couple of times when I was a captain, that we were going through like, some adversity on the team. There were people, they weren't happy with some of the things that were going on, like on the coaching end, and then also on the athletic department end. So, kind of learning how to navigate that and talk about that with important people like in a politically correct way, it was very hard as like a 20, 21-year-old student, like knowing how to kind of like navigate this, like really touchy subject, and not say the wrong thing. So I think that really helped me that it definitely wasn't all rainbows and butterflies all the time. Like, we definitely went through some things as a team that needed to be addressed. And when I was a captain, during that time, it was definitely a learning experience for me to learn how to lead a group of people through some difficult times.

Reflecting on this experience, Preslie notes learning that engaging in leadership is not always “rainbows and butterflies,” which presented an opportunity to develop her leadership capacity through overcoming adversity as a team. When asked about how she was able to overcome this particular challenge, Preslie says:

I think, I, that one really brought me like closer to our coaching staff. I think that it made me realize that I couldn't do everything on my own and the coaching staff couldn't do everything on their own, that we kind of like work together. So yeah, I think it taught me like when we're going through, when you're going through hard things as like a leader or even as just the group as a whole, to work together and not try to like solve this entire problem on your own. That like, the reason why you have other coaching staff and why your teammates are very smart and capable, too. And you have all these resources, so use them, and that we can kind of figure everything out together. And it's not just like my responsibility.

As Preslie navigated this difficult experience, she was faced with the limitations of her own individual ability to influence the group. But through her process of learning to work with others, she developed the understanding of leadership as a shared group experience, where she could rely on coaches and teammates for support. For Preslie, learning this leadership lesson appears to be a direct consequence of the complexity of the challenge facing her organization. This leadership experience required Preslie to shift her mental model of leadership from a limited, leader-centric perspective toward a more sophisticated relation-oriented outlook that values the input and talents of the group. Similarly, Grant, who identifies as a White man, shares his experience of developing a more sophisticated, relational approach to leadership during his term as his fraternity's vice president:

Being the leader of volunteers and stuff like that, and college age kids, you know, a lot of

times, they just don't want to do stuff, or they've got other things going on and it's [difficult] trying to get them to be able to do things. And I think the biggest takeaway I had was like, sometimes I would just do people's work for them, and do whatever they're supposed to do and just do it myself, because I was like, whatever, it just needs to happen. And then I slowly started to learn well, that's not even being a leader, right? Like, if I just do everything, one, that's not scalable, and sustainable. So, I was like, okay, how do I convince people to kind of start to do it?

Grant expresses the realization that although he held a formal leadership position within his fraternity, he was, in his own words, "not even being a leader," which as he comes to find, requires the inclusion of others:

So, I think kind of what I learned was, taking a, trying to get them to take ownership of their position, or their project or anything like that. Where you know, whatever it is, you put your name on it, or you put their name on it, you are the one who always has them talk about it, in chapter or in meetings in a business setting where it's like, hey, this person is driving the ship here, I'm just kind of in the background. So, I think that was a thing that I kind of slowly started to learn was, you know, if you let them kind of drive the ship, have their name on it, they become personally invested in it a little bit more.

In Grant's case, we see the process by which he relinquishes a core leader-centric knowledge principle that a leader must do it all for a more inclusive understanding of leadership that empowers individual group members to invest in the organization more deeply through opportunities for others to "drive the ship," and bring to bear their own responsibility for organizational success. As with Preslie's captaincy of the cheer team, Grant's role as fraternity vice president provided the necessary leadership challenges to experience a shift toward a more interdependent and reciprocal approach to leadership. For Kiana, who identifies as a White

woman, the pathway to this leadership lesson developed through her experiences as co-captain of the women's university softball team:

I mean, the softball team thing, that's number one for me. . . It made me find my voice as a leader. Like, for example, we've got like, gassers – we're running back and forth, back and forth, we're about to vomit. And it's like, we all have these [individual] times that we have to make. And if someone doesn't make their time, the rep for the entire team doesn't count. . . And I'm like, yo, figure it out. We need you to do this right now, like everyone else is counting on you find a way how to do this. . . And we did all sorts of other drills where like, like running, that's my strength. But then like, I have my weaknesses too. And maybe we're doing this one skill drill during practice that I suck in. And until I do it right, we have to run a pole [sprint across the field from foul pole to foul pole] every single time I mess up or something like I definitely had my moments of weakness as well. And that's when my teammates had to pick me up too. Which really, I mean like that's what made it all work is it's not like the same people were like yelling at others all the time. It's all everybody picking each other up.

Although Kiana held a formal leadership position as co-captain of the softball team, she was presented with experiences in which the success or failure of the group could not be solely determined by her individual efforts. Learning to trust and rely upon her teammates, Kiana recognized the value that her teammates provide to the group, even as her positional leadership role became more ill-defined while sharing leadership responsibilities amongst her team members. As our respondents reflected on the leadership experiences, we have consistently observed that despite their involvement in holistically different co-curricular organizations, their experiences generated very similar outcomes, namely, learning that leadership is not an independent action, but rather requires engaging the collective capacities of the group for success.

In Service of The Group: “Give them what they want . . . but also what they need.” Co-curricular experiences provide numerous opportunities for students to develop post-industrial leadership capacities which center the values of the group above that of an individual positional leader. Indeed, through their various co-curricular involvements, our respondents express learning that the purpose of leading is to serve the needs of the group first, a critical component of a post-industrial leadership framework. For Aurelie, who identifies as an African American woman, serving on the student union programming board provided an experience which served to deepen her commitment to the needs of others:

Yeah, so one of my moments was trying to figure out, for example, who to bring to campus [for] events. So, it was sitting down looking at the budget, looking at which would be the most cost effective. Looking at how can we do more for students for the money they pay for activity fees. So, which would be the most beneficial? I mean, I remember one time we brought on Hasan Minhaj. And, oh, man, that was something because it was something people really enjoyed, and it was overfilled. You could see people in the Union like that room. They were like, outside. We just tried to look in and we're just like, oh my goodness, this is a lot [of students]. Like what can we do best for the students? What can we do best to see, give them what they want and what they don't know they want but also what they need.

A common thread throughout Aurelie's response is the value she places in addressing the needs of her fellow students, and how this serves as the central goal of her leadership position. When Aurelie was asked how she was able to determine the best course of action for serving the interests of students overall, her response was: “Democracy. . . Yeah, just democracy. Just if you have a couple of choices, which one do people think would be best, would most benefit [the students].” Another participant, Lydia, who identifies as a White woman, underwent a similar process of learning that employing a

democratic process of decision-making can strengthen a group while serving on the executive board of her sorority. When asked about how the experience informed her understanding of what it means to be a member of the broader community, Lydia says:

I think it taught me when to step up and say something, and when to step back and let somebody else talk. I, there were nine of us on the executive board. And everybody had different roles to play. But like we all were making the same decisions together. And I mean, the community, everybody had an opinion on every decision that was being made in the whole house, all like 150 people. You can't make a decision without everybody's input. So yeah, I think that was pretty valuable.

Despite the executive power afforded by Lydia's formal leadership position, she actively engaged her sorority sisters in the decision-making process, learning the value of attending to the opinions and needs of others, even if this meant taking a “step back.” Lydia went on to describe how this decision-making process unfolded and how she intentionally solicited the involvement of her sorority sisters:

For the most part, we had a meeting every week, we would make all house decisions all together. We'd vote on everything. It was very involved. We'd put signs on the doors that said what we were gonna be voting on that week. We really made it like, this is on you. This is your experience too. We're [the Executive Board is] not gonna make the decisions.

Aurelie and Lydia's positional leadership roles in a communal governing body provided them numerous opportunities to recognize that the purpose of leadership is to identify and fulfill the needs of those whom they serve while giving voice to individuals throughout the organization to do the same thing. For other participants, arriving at this understanding required more trial and error in their leadership roles. Such was the case for Caitlin, who

identifies as a White woman, and served as co-chair of the fundraising committee for the university dance team:

The dance team was extremely bad about fundraising and me and my co-chair wanted to turn that around, and we had all these great ideas. And the girls weren't particularly interested in helping to see that through, even though they knew the outcome would ultimately benefit them in the end. So that was definitely a good learning experience dealing with, Okay, well, we have this idea, we want to execute this idea. But we're receiving pushback, even though ultimately, the execution is going to benefit everyone on the team. So, we were going to do a silent auction . . . and we told the girls, okay, this is how many like companies we want you to talk with to try to get people to donate to our silent auction. And when we were getting pushback on that, me and my co-chair literally spent an entire day driving around, going out to businesses so the girls could see that we were actually doing what we were telling them to do.

Initially for Caitlin, she viewed her leadership role as purely managing the tasks of the group, which limited her ability to recognize the needs of her team members. Over time, the limitations of this viewpoint presented an opportunity to expand her awareness of the needs of her team members and model the behavior that might encourage greater participation from them.

To this point, we have illustrated the learning outcomes our participants have identified through holding a positional leadership role within their respective co-curricular organizations. Additionally, as noted by Guthrie et al. (2018), leadership development also occurs through direct observation of the leadership behaviors of others. Breonna, who identifies as an Asian American woman, learned about serving the needs of others by observing the poor leadership behavior of her shift manager, while working in the university dining hall:

But I will say, I learned what I wanted out of a leader in order to be a good employee. And also on the flip side of that, who I wanted to be as a leader, because I had a few experiences in shifts in management... They come in, and they do everything like they did at their old building or something, and they don't listen to you and they don't value your feedback. "It's my way or the highway" and there was a lot of conflict when we had some specific management switch changes. And I knew people were getting tired of coming to work, they didn't like the management. None of us wanted to be there and I knew that wasn't something that I ever wanted to make my employees feel if I ever get to the point of being, you know, a high, a high position leader in a company. And so it taught me a lot about what didn't want to be as a leader.

Our participants, through their commitment to supporting the success of their organizations, collectively shared several key lessons learned. In general, they indicated that a primary responsibility of leading was to help others feel an increased sense of duty to the group. Principal means for accomplishing this was to engender collective decision-making, role model behaviors they would like to see in others, and perhaps most significantly, create processes that might not be popular or easy to enact, but would result in better group outcomes.

Preparing the Way: "The right thing to do is to help the next person." As our respondents reflected on their numerous co-curricular leadership experiences, we consistently observed an expression of generativity toward the individuals and organizations that they associated with throughout their university experience. For some of our participants, the desire to prepare the way for others naturally evolved through their participation in co-curricular organizations. Bryan, who identifies as an Asian American man, discusses the evolution of this interest while serving as director of internal development for the campus's business honors society:

So, me and a co-director, we were running, like, mentorship programs where we're pairing up a candidate, so like a new, a candidate that's new into the chapter, pairing them up with, him or her up with someone that's more experienced, so that there's like more one-on-one attention. And then you also run, you know, weekly, bi-weekly, called presentations, where you're teaching them about different skills. Me and my co-director, we really were both very passionate about kind of helping others. So, we, we created PowerPoints, we spent a significant amount of time kind of building out a curriculum that I believe that the organization still uses to this day.

Reflecting on the lessons learned through his involvement in the organization Bryan says:

Yeah, I think the biggest thing that, that organization taught me was that, you know, everyone, no one gets anywhere without help. . . I got all my internships because of, because of mentors for me, because they were willing to sit down with me and review my resume, give me tips, help me with my interview skills, and whatnot. And that's something that I wanted to give back as well.

The initial focus of Bryan's involvement with the business honors society centered on the numerous personal benefits that would result from his participation, but over time, he discovered that the greatest personal benefit was the opportunity to develop younger participants and guide them toward success, a benefit that his mentors similarly provided him. Alex, who identifies as a LatinX man, also learned the importance of guiding the next generation of students through his position as an intramural sports manager:

When I was a freshman, I was hired at intramurals. And as a sophomore, I was promoted to be a manager, to be an IM, an intramural manager. So, I started as a referee, but then I was supervising the referees and it was cool to get to know

everybody, and to really, you have to be early when you're a supervisor. Like you can't, as a referee, if you come like two minutes late, it's like, "Alright, well, hop in the game." But as a supervisor, everyone's like, "Well, where's the supervisor," so you can't be late. So, it was cool to be relied on by a lot of people. I knew I had to come through. And then really making sure everyone knew what they had to do, where they had to go, what to be aware of.

In addition to Alex's trial and error leadership experiences as an intramural manager, he regularly turned to his peer mentors for advice and developmental support. As the complexities of his leadership role increased, he often found himself:

... talking to some of the older people, talking and hearing their experiences. . . So, it was real helpful to hear what they had to say. And then as I got older, I became one of those supervisors who would help the youngins out. And I remember I would even, I was even part of the process that interviewed the referees, so they can become supervisors. So, I was part of that process when I was like a senior. So, just kind of going full circle where I was one of the old guys and then I was teaching the young people how to, you know, my experiences and everything like that.

Alex expresses finding pleasure in the cyclical nature of his leadership role and the opportunity to provide guidance to referees stepping into supervisory positions. For other participants, the absence of guidance while serving in their co-curricular leadership role became the impetus for giving back to those who succeeded them. Such was the experience for Grant:

Yeah, and I would say when I transitioned out of my role of VP at the fraternity, like, you know, there's not a ton of documentation on how to do things. So, I kind of came up and wrote up some stuff and met with the next person. And I was like, obviously, if you have any questions, or

you don't know what to do, or anything, just call me. So. And that was, that was another thing that I kind of learned too in leadership roles. It can be easy to just be like, oh, my time's up, I don't do this anymore, like I'm done. But the right thing to kind of do is to help the next person.

Through their participation in various co-curricular organizations, our participants express learning that leaders possess a responsibility to help prepare the next generation of students for both individual and organizational success. This expression of generativity generally occurred when our participants purposefully dedicated themselves to mentoring younger members of their respective organizations, imparting the wisdom of their leadership experience, while also considering the broader needs of the organizations they belonged to.

Discussion

Findings from our study strongly suggest that our participants can describe how they have developed their own individual capacity to lead through their involvement in co-curricular organizations. These findings illuminate the developmental process by which post-secondary education students report learning post-industrial leadership conceptions through myriad formal co-curricular involvements. Indeed, our findings suggest that students who actively dedicate themselves to participating in the formal co-curriculum may encounter various leadership lessons through organizational experiences that provide opportunities to develop post-industrial leadership conceptions. For many of our alumni, their co-curricular experiences provided an opportunity to learn that the practice of leadership is an interdependent process, rather than an individual leader's actions or behaviors directed at a group, which Komives and colleagues have described as the primary indicator of a more advanced individual identity as a leader (Komives, et al., 2005). Their learning commonly occurred as our alumni encountered significant group and organizational challenges that revealed their inability to do everything on their own. These experiences led our participants to create reciprocal and interdependent leadership processes that invite

collaboration amongst group members and engage the collective capacities of the group.

Alumni also report learning through their co-curricular leadership experiences that serving the needs of the group requires them to do the work to hold "group success" as their primary goal. Through observational and direct leadership experience, our participants found that serving the needs of the group is an active process whereby leaders give space for group members to have a voice and share opinions, role-model behaviors necessary for organizational success, and invite group members to participate in democratic decision-making processes.

Findings from this study also suggest that for some participants, holding formal leadership positions within their respective co-curricular organizations helped them learn that leaders possess a responsibility to prepare the next generation of students. As our respondents reflected on their co-curricular experiences, they expressed a desire to give back to younger members of their organization, often through personal mentorship or the development of organizational training materials to serve future members. For our participants, this expression of generativity came at the twilight of their organizational involvement and appears to be a reflection of their long-term commitment to the co-curricular organization with which they were affiliated.

Implications for Campus Administrators. Many developmental psychologists (e.g., Kegan, 1982; Baxter Magolda, 1999) suggest that it is through the experience of personal challenge that often results in movement towards personal development. Results from this study suggest that the challenges student leaders face within the formal co-curriculum is what may promote development beyond self-centric leadership beliefs toward interdependent relational leadership conceptions. The experience of challenge led our participants to face their individual limitations as leaders, which required them to develop inclusive leadership practices that actively engage the collective capacities of the group. These results suggest that postsecondary administrators and advisors may best support leadership development by encouraging students to create challenging

organizational goals where the process for achieving them can only result from effort across the organization.

Our results also suggest the potential for leadership development that can arise through helping students build a spirit of service and responsibility to something greater than the individual within their co-curricular settings. Many of our participants reported that, years later, it was through their felt responsibility to sustain success beyond their direct involvement within their co-curricular experiences that led them to recognize the importance of doing so in professional and community settings. Administrators might increase the depth of leadership learning within students by more intentionally and comprehensively teaching these values within the student-centered settings for which they are responsible.

Implications for Researchers. Participants within this study identified numerous organizational processes within their respective groups that served as drivers of their leadership development. These findings invite future researchers to specifically focus on the organizational processes that may promote or hinder student leadership development. Such research may enable leadership educators to prescribe certain co-curricular experiences as having the ability to foster the development of particular leadership capacities, or clusters of capacities, for students seeking practical leadership development experiences in addition to other academic leadership education experiences. For example, the processes by which students as a whole were allowed to have a voice and influence organizational direction seemed to have been a particularly salient factor that led to certain realizations within our participants. Future research might focus on the role of group decision-making on individual student learning and leadership growth.

Limitations. While our participants overwhelmingly report positive developmental outcomes from their co-curricular involvements, we recognize that participants from this study may represent a minority of highly engaged and dedicated alumni who felt confident in discussing their experiences as positional leaders within their respective

organizations. As such, there is need for researchers to further investigate the individual characteristics of students who thrive in such co-curricular environments as well as those who may languish. Furthermore, future research should also investigate the degree to which a student's level of dedication to a particular co-curricular organization may moderate their ability to develop leadership capacities generally associated with co-curricular involvement. More knowledge in this area can help inform how administrators can optimize the co-curriculum for maximum potential for broad-based student learning and growth.

Conclusion

This study examined the leadership lessons embedded within the co-curriculum that undergraduate students report learning through diverse organizational experiences, and which contributed to the development of post-industrial leadership capacities. Our participants reported involvement in a vast array of co-curricular organizations. Despite the breadth of their separate experiences, they collectively expressed a shift toward recognizing that leadership processes involve interdependent actors working together in common purpose and a spirit of reciprocity and generativity towards the future. For many participants, this shift occurred by participating in and observing processes and behaviors within co-curricular settings, often through experiencing challenging circumstances in a team setting. This study provides empirical data that support the need for leadership educators and campus administrators to develop collaborative initiatives that more intentionally integrate leadership education with the co-curriculum. Our findings might shed light on specifically how co-curricular experiences are associated with student leadership development, especially in helping students master post-industrial leadership skills necessary for success as adults in contemporary professional settings.

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