

Weaving the Tapestry: A Student Affairs Perspective on the Leadership Research Agenda

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The tapestry of leadership development has a long history in American higher education. As a faculty member for the last 26 years of my career teaching the history of student affairs and higher education and studying college student leadership, I enjoyed examining perspectives on the evolution of leadership development and how it grew from being incidental to the college experience into the rich, vibrant tapestry it is now, intentionally developed in the curriculum and the co-curriculum.

A Short History of Leadership Development in Higher Education

The dominant narrative begins with the founding of Harvard College in 1636-- the education of young boys who were college students expected to assume their leadership obligations in society. Whether with futures as clergy or eldersmen, those with a college education assumed government and community leadership roles. Although no specific formal leadership development was part of their college experience, the cultural expectation was that college was creating leaders; these youth did study ethics and were expected to develop gentlemanly character. [Note that many colonial-era, selective institutions that exist today often still have a contemporary cultural message that “we do not need leadership development because all of our students are leaders.”]

As institutional types diversified in the 1800s, college youth studied to enter the military, business, education, agriculture, and other fields. Women began to receive college educations in the early 1800s largely in single sex institutions; the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 instigated that the average family could send their sons to college; and minority-serving institutions began in the mid-1800s largely for African Americans under a separate-but-equal doctrine (See Thelin, 2003). Many of these colleges, like historically Black colleges and universities, made leadership an unintentional outcome of the college experiences, admonishing students to live up to those expectations but doing little to develop leadership capacity. Leadership was clearly viewed as a characteristic or skill of an individual.

Student affairs emerges. Throughout this evolution, in loco parentis was the de facto institutional-student relationship. The president and faculty stood in place of the student’s

parents and acted on their behalf for his welfare. Faculty expressed a deep care and concern for the development of students. As institutions became more complex (for example, instituting graduate studies, creating academic disciplines, and expecting research productivity), out of concern for student welfare, many faculty intentionally assumed roles away from their teaching duties in the areas of student academic advising, discipline, counseling, and as tutors in residential colleges (Schetlin, 1969). The first models for deans of students, deans of men, and deans of women emerged in the late 1890s and were positions held by faculty members. Over time (with the emergence of psychology as a discipline, the growth of such fields as the guidance movement and Dewey's pragmatism and emphasis on democratic and experiential learning), student affairs roles grew to be ones educators prepared for with graduate degrees in such fields as guidance and counseling, college student personnel, and higher education administration (See Dungy & Gordan, 2011; Nuss, 2003). People and offices that handled these functions were organized under a dean into divisions of student affairs or student services. Specializations in such areas as student activities and student organizations developed in the early 1900s and by the 1990s specializations included leadership education, service learning, and offices for civic engagement. The accountability movement in this 1990s era led institutions to establish explicit student outcomes and shape programs (e.g. credit and non-credit) to build those outcomes. Leadership, global leadership, civic engagement, social justice, and promoting personal responsibility were often among those outcomes. These outcomes were advanced nationally by such groups as the Association of American Colleges & Universities in their LEAP agenda (2007) and by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS; 2012), a consortium of 42 student affairs associations.

Student affairs evolves. Throughout history, student affairs educators have always worked with the development of positional student leaders, such as officers in clubs and organizations, and in such roles as resident assistant or orientation advisor or with key student organizations that claimed leadership development as an outcome of membership, such as fraternities, sororities, the Black Student Union, or sports. As I noted in the first chapter of the *Handbook for Student Leadership Development* (Komives, 2011), until the late 1980s and early 1990s, most co-curricular leadership education efforts were typically atheoretical including largely skill building activities focused on those in traditional leadership positions. CAS established the first standard on student leadership programs in 1996 sponsored by the National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs. Embracing the philosophy that all people possess and can develop their leadership capacity, in the last 30 years many colleges and universities did design leadership programs accessible to any student through specialty programs (e.g. emerging leaders, women in leadership, multicultural retreats), expanded experiential education with leadership outcomes (e.g. service learning, alternative Spring Breaks, internships), and partnered with academic departments to offer both credit experiences (e.g. leadership courses, minors, or majors) as well as non-credit credentials (e.g. certificate programs).

Both/And

One of the rich lessons from studying chaos theory in the early 1990s was the recognition of the weaknesses of “either/or” thinking and the richness of “both/and” thinking (Komives, 2001). Clearly college students do not learn and develop leadership only in the classroom or in the co-curricular experience, nor is leadership learned only on-campus or only in their “real world” life experience. When our team was developing the document, *Learning Reconsidered* (NASPA/ACPA, 2004), we affirmed and promoted the powerful message that student learning and development occur across their whole experience and that the dangers of thinking of academic learning separate from personal development create an inadequate pedagogy for transformative learning. Learning and development are not opposite sides of a coin, they are on the same side of the coin. Learning is inherently developmental and occurs everywhere. As one of our team members noted, “In our need to put things in categories, we have classified some parts of higher education as curricular, and other parts as co-curricular, but students just call it college” (Keeling, 2006, p. vii). After an era of 80 years of the curriculum and the co-curriculum being functionally siloed, the educational foci of such areas as leadership development, multiculturalism, service learning, social justice, and others have brought exciting partnerships between academic and student affairs educators.

There is a wise African parable (also attributed to Aesop) that sticks tied together in a bundle are unbreakable. American colleges and universities are comprised of many critical “sticks”: academic disciplines, majors, courses, administrative departments like admissions, student affairs units like student activities, counseling, residence life, athletics, and so many “sticks” more like alumni programs, physical plant, and technology services. Leadership and multiculturalism are binding constructs serving as the “threads” that belong everywhere in the institution and serve as “ties” that strengthen the bundle. Leadership is not owned by the psychology, business, or communications majors or by the office of human resource development or the student activities department. Leadership should be addressed in every venue; it belongs everywhere. Again, leadership is a “both/and” organizational construct, not an “either/or” proposition. Every venue is an opportunity to engage students in the study, development, or practice of leadership. Forming vibrant partnerships across these units brings diverse leadership educators together to advance leadership as a critical college student outcome and weaves a rich campus tapestry of leadership development for everyone at the institution.

National Leadership Education Research Agenda

The tapestry of understanding leadership development can take shape with the inaugural National Leadership Education Research Agenda (NLERA). The ambitious agenda is a solid contribution at strategic directions to guide the engagement in scholars and scholar-practitioners toward evidence-based practice. Although only mentioned in passing, I laud the report for even mentioning Boyer’s phenomenal 1990 work revising the focus of scholarship in higher education. This agenda does indeed seek to honor the Boyeresque categories of the scholarship

of discovery, the scholarship of integration, the scholarship of application, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. That taxonomy might serve us well to further identify what mathematicians and scientists describe as *classes of problems* with definitional and assumptive boundaries that could guide deeper inquiry.

As we move forward, it will be essential to situate this agenda into the tapestry that is already woven by the research and scholarship of decades of work from diverse fields that directly and indirectly inform leadership; we are not starting over. For example, there is a broad knowledge base in moral and ethical development to apply to the study and practice of leadership. I am reminded of serving as the Dean's representative on numerous dissertation committees outside my student affairs field, attending faculty colloquia, or attending job talks by prospective candidates in other programs in my academic department (e.g. school psychology, rehabilitation counseling). I was always struck by the similarity in constructs for which we used slightly different labels so we did not know the bodies of parallel work addressing similar research questions. An author so well known in our student affairs research was unknown to someone in another discipline and visa versa.

The NLERA is a large and complex agenda. I know the authors of this document would be the first to say (as they do in the text) that it is incomplete, open to critique, and should be revised on a regular basis—and it is an engaging start to this process. Although it is not possible to address each element of the agenda I did want to offer several challenges and opportunities I see for further discussion and use. These suggestions are directed at student affairs educators but may apply also to academic researchers.

Broaden the unit of analysis. The target of learning and development is typically the individual college student or a group of individuals (often identified by their gender, race, or some other social identity). Quantitatively those identity groups are typically studied with aggregate data and certainly serve a good purpose. Student affairs leadership educators have a unique opportunity and imperative also to study leadership in organized groups, particularly student organizations and systems of organizations. Although the individual as the unit of analysis is most common, that leaves gaps, indeed chasms, in understanding leadership dynamics in diverse types of organizations, organizational elements and processes that lead to high functioning organizations, and perhaps most important, dimensions of organizations that nurture and develop leadership within and among members. Research priority #4 seeks to address this domain but I think we must expand and push the agenda further to truly understand leadership as a process. For example, individual efficacy for leadership is critical to study, but Bandura (1997) also notes that collective efficacy is a different phenomena and not the aggregate of the self-efficacy of individuals in the group. My academic department was comprised of individuals with high self-efficacy to lead in their fields, but as a unit we had low collective efficacy that we could accomplish our goals or shared agenda. We must study this phenomenon and others in the group, organization, and system level of analysis.

Address definitional challenges. We still need some work on describing the nature of the scholarship in our field. Some terms we are using in our shared scholarship perhaps do need some clear definitions. Is it multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary, or all of the above? What is an area, a field, a discipline, and what do we mean by leadership studies, education, development, and training? We have some common understandings of those terms through the work of the International Leadership Association (ILA) and the CAS leadership standard and this agenda could help us attend to that language. Although many of us use a definition of leadership like the one in the NLERA or a corollary to it that emphasizes relationships, ethics, and positive outcomes, I believe we need to support numerous philosophies/approaches/definitions of leadership because numerous perspectives do exist. It is very dangerous to promote (even inadvertently) a dominant narrative or definition. To mix metaphors, the question to ask may be is it “believing is seeing” or is it “seeing is believing” (Komives, 2013)? I have always loved the aphorism of “how can the fish describe water?” This may be the essence of Kegan’s (1994) subject-object shift: how can we see clearly what we live with everyday in our own philosophies and beliefs so intensely that we cannot imagine other views. Are we ethnocentrically so enmeshed in our own views of leadership (whether that be Western approaches or other single narrative perspectives) that we cannot even see other approaches, other narratives, as being leadership? Can we imagine the counter narratives of those not in the dominant culture who may view leadership quite differently. Embracing all these views will be useful. Those diverse views add vibrancy to our tapestry. This agenda should also help us explore those diverse views of leadership so we can “see” it more clearly.

Get better measures. I concur with the NLERA that leadership can and needs to be studied through diverse methodologies. Certainly the research question should drive the methodology chosen to address it. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies and mixed method studies will help advance this agenda. I want to comment on several research methods items. (1) Admittedly, much of the research on students is self-report using indirect measures. Although direct measures are needed, we need not disparage indirect measures, particularly student self-perception, as much as we often do (Gonyea, 2005). (2) I will always be grateful to ALE for the papers I heard at the 2006 conference that introduced me to the methodological concept of response-shift bias (Howard, 1980; Rohs, 2002; Rohs & Langone, 1997). Indeed, that ALE conference was a good example to me of getting into another field of study (i.e., agricultural education) and learning about methodology to apply to my own field. In this case Rohs and other work made monumental sense to me for the Multi-institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) we had just administered. As a cross-sectional design MSL has known limitations, but it actually may have been a strength to be cross-sectional as perspectives of leadership evolve over time. Our Leadership Identity Research (Komives, Owen, Longerbeam, Mainella, & Osteen, 2005) clearly showed us a stage-like development in perspectives/philosophies of leadership; what a student may think leadership is entering college at 18 may be quite different that they consider leadership to be at 22 as a graduating senior, leaving messy data to interpret. The cross sectional design assures they are assessing their retrospective capacity in leadership against their currently

held views. (3) Challenged by measuring student outcomes, we need more measures that are valid, reliable, short, and open-source or free. We need measures for such important concepts as leader identity development stages, developmental readiness, leader effectiveness, and group/organizational leadership capacity to name a few. Many readers can stake their dissertation-flag on one of those and make a valuable contribution to this agenda.

Advancing the agenda. I would boldly assert that this agenda will get little traction unless associations such as ALE fund research grants to advance the agenda. If faculty and student affairs educators could apply for even small seed funds to help cover data analysis, transcriptions, and incentives, the agenda would be advanced. Likewise, student affairs staff might form thriving partnerships with research faculty and provide courses releases, seed money, access to student organizations and other data sources like the MSL or the Wabash Report data, to facilitate the meaningful research of academics who want to advance the NLERA. In addition to doing original research ourselves, student affairs people need to find the faculty on campus with a research agenda centering on student leadership and partner to advance this work.

Use better what we already know. Too often we reinvent the wheel or think we need original data on constructs that are already well established in the literature. There may need to be a local footprint put on some findings, but we can adapt/adopt many established research findings to guide program design. Student affairs leadership educators, for example, can use the findings from the MSL as a basis for budget request and program design.

Conclusion

As leadership educators go forward with this agenda and in the related work of further developing leadership programs at their institutions, it will be critical to approach this work as shared, collaborative, belonging in every discipline, and delivered through diverse institutional entities as both the curriculum and the co-curriculum together and separately. Studying and researching the work we do is essential. This agenda helps us advance that agenda.

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Susan R. Komives is Professor Emerita in the Student Affairs Program at the University of Maryland where she taught until 2012. She is immediate past president of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) and a former President of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). She served as Vice President of two colleges and is the author of a dozen books or monographs including *Student Services*, *Exploring Leadership*, *Leadership for A Better World*, and the *Handbook for Student Leadership Development*. She was a member of the ensemble that developed the Social Change Model of Leadership Development. She is a co-founder of the National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs, and was chair of the ACPA Senior Scholars, a senior scholar with the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership, and a member of the Board of Directors of the International Leadership Association. She has consulted in leadership or student affairs in Canada, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Qatar. She is the 2011 recipient of the University of Maryland Board of Regent's Award for Faculty Teaching and the NASPA Shaffer Award for Academic Excellence as a graduate faculty member. A recipient of both the ACPA and NASPA outstanding research and scholarship awards, her research includes a grounded theory on Leadership Identity Development and the international Multi-institutional Study of Leadership. She is the 2012 recipient of the ACPA Life Time Achievement Award and the 2013 Leadership and Service Award from the Association of Leadership Educators.