

LATINX LEADERSHIP LEARNING: Lessons from an Undergraduate Academic Course

Abstract

Identity-based leadership courses support and engage more Latinx students in higher education by focusing on identity development and capacity building. Academic courses that take into consideration cultural relevance foster the academic persistence of undergraduate Latinx students and can support degree completion. This article explores the significance of providing leadership learning opportunities for Latinx undergraduate college students and highlights one institution's journey in developing and providing an undergraduate Latinx Leadership course. Theoretical underpinnings in leadership learning, culturally relevant leadership learning, and Latinx leadership development are provided as a foundation to the course. Reflections gathered from students' perceptions of taking the undergraduate Latinx Leadership Development course inform lessons learned in the process, the challenges of developing and teaching such a course. Implications for leadership teaching and learning are also shared.

Leadership Learning and Latinx Students

Leadership education should centralize students and their learning in all educational processes. However, this is often neglected, and educators instead focus on what needs to be taught instead of starting with what should be learned. Leadership learning, more specifically culturally relevant leadership learning, frames the course we are discussing. To better understand this course, digging into Latinx student development and their leadership learning needs to be explored.

Leadership Learning Framework

Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) describe leadership

learning as a multi-faceted and integrated phenomenon where individuals are influenced by various experiences in different contexts. More specifically, they define leadership learning as "changes in knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, and values resulting from educational experiences, both co-curricular and curricular in nature, associated with the activity of leadership" (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018, p. 57). The leadership learning framework (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018) is an accessible model for educators to use both conceptually and in practice to intentionally develop programs that put the learner at the heart of education. The six aspects of leadership learning include knowledge, development, training, observation, engagement, and metacognition (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018).

Leadership knowledge is foundational for all learning

and adjoins leadership development, training, observation, and engagement, which all contribute to metacognition. Knowledge acquisition occurs from the moment new leadership language is used and continues in various forms. Leadership development focuses on intrapersonal aspects, specifically where development of identity, capacity, and efficacy occurs. Leadership training centers on the skill- and competency-based behavioral aspects of learning. Leadership observation refers to the cultural and social aspects of leadership learning. The interactional, relational, experiential, and interpersonal aspects of leadership learning are collectively referred to as leadership engagement, which is where the learner is an active participant. The five aspects of the leadership learning framework (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018) of knowledge, development, training, observation, and engagement culminate in leadership metacognition. Metacognition is at the heart of the leadership learning model because through honest reflection and critical thinking around learning experiences, students make meaning to adapt and apply what was learned (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018).

Linking the leadership learning framework to context is important in creating environments where diverse students can learn and experience leadership. Learning is an individual journey, where identity (Jones, 2016), capacity, and efficacy (Dugan, 2017) are critical to thoughtfully creating leadership education opportunities that are culturally relevant for all participants. Because consideration of cultural relevance is critical, we draw from Bertrand Jones et al.'s (2016) culturally relevant leadership learning model.

Culturally Relevant Leadership Learning (CRL)

Shifting leadership education toward learner centrality is crucial to developing intentional and holistic leadership education programs. Grounded in Ladson-Billings' (1995) culturally relevant pedagogy,

CRL (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016) supports educators in creating programs that consider the challenges of diversity. CRL encourages educators to critique mainstream models of leadership, outmoded instructional strategies, and traditional methods of learning (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). To better understand CRL, educators need to recognize the importance of identity, capacity, and efficacy in creating leadership learning opportunities.

Identity is a constantly evolving self-portrait encompassing multiple dimensions of self. As Guthrie et al. (2013) explain, leadership identity is a student's personal theory about who they are within the practice of leadership in their own leader identity. Developing leadership capacity stems from three core beliefs of leadership educators, including how "the skills of leadership can and should be learned; that the development of leadership capacities are inextricably intertwined; and that leadership educators can purposefully foster environments that help students integrate knowledge, skills, and experiences in meaningful ways" (Owen, 2012, p. 22). Efficacy is the belief we can be successful at specific activities. Therefore, leadership efficacy is "a student's beliefs about his or her abilities to exercise their leadership knowledge and skills in a given situation" (Denzine, 1999, p. 3).

Understanding how the interaction of identity, capacity, and efficacy influences leadership learning helps educators intentionally develop programs. CRL focuses on leader identity, capacity, and efficacy while taking into consideration organizational and campus culture introducing five critical domains: historical legacy of inclusion and exclusion, compositional diversity, and psychological, behavioral, and organizational/structural aspects (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). The domains provide opportunities for leadership educators to consider the significance of students' experience in leadership learning from a campus climate perspective. One way of acting upon these opportunities is through developing and

offering academic identity-based leadership studies courses.

Latinx Students and Leadership Learning

The term “leadership” has different connotations and definitions. It is especially evident with the intersection of culture and identity. For some students of color, their definitions of leadership may not correlate with the societal perception and understanding of leadership – hierarchical, authoritative, and position-based. According to a study conducted by Armino et al. (2000), students of color, which include all students who self-identify as students of color, did not like the term “leader” and would rather not use the term to describe themselves. Students associated the term “leadership” with a means of dominance and a burden (Armino et al., 2000). The participants’ responses to the title of “leader” reinforced the argument that leadership language does not fit all students, even though institutions of higher education have been built via a hierarchical ideology of leadership (i.e. leadership positions and titles). To students of color, the term “leader” has been associated with dominance, an image of the “white male in charge,” and a perpetuation of stereotypes and discriminatory practices (Kodama & Laylo, 2017).

In connection with defining leadership and leadership language, Lozano (2015) stated leadership development has been rarely examined as a critical aspect of the collegiate experience for Latinx students. The purpose of Lozano’s (2015) study was to examine how Latinx students defined “leader” and how they experienced leadership development attending a historically White institution. One of the main findings of the study focused on how students defined leaders and leadership. Participants in this study defined leaders as role models with an emphasis on the action of being a role model (Lozano, 2015); according to the participants, to be a role model a leader must motivate and inspire others to act. Participants also defined a leader based on the amount of time an individual dedicated to a certain task or the group (Lozano, 2015). Leaders stood out to the participants because they dedicated

an inordinate amount of time and energy in certain activities. The participants agreed that leaders did not need to have a title. Lozano (2015) argued that, to aid in the leadership development of Latinx students, administrators must first understand how Latinx students define leadership, their leadership journey, and offer culturally relevant support and resources.

Torres (2019) conducted a similar study on the leader identity development of 12 undergraduate Latina women at a predominately White institution. Overall the 12 participants were affirmed of their leader identity through their peers, involvements on campus, family, and mentors (Torres, 2019). When defining what it means to be a leader, the overarching theme was helping others. For example, one of the participants defined leader identity as “someone who can see the good qualities of other people and help them harness it to better the community or for others to reach their full potential” (Torres, 2019, p. 86). Student definitions showed how they viewed and defined being a leader, how they perceived leadership as collaborative in nature, and how they focused on helping others reach a common goal.

Undergraduate Latinx Leadership Development Course

The undergraduate course, LDR 2243: Latinx Leadership Development, is offered through the Undergraduate Certificate in Leadership Studies at Florida State University. A partnership between the College of Education and the Division of Student Affairs, the Undergraduate Certificate in Leadership Studies is an 18-credit, interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, experiential program (Guthrie & Bovio, 2014). Allen and Shehane (2016) described Florida State University’s Undergraduate Certificate in Leadership Studies as an example of an academic/curricular-based integrated program that draws from several disciplines for content.

The three-credit-hour undergraduate course, Latinx Leadership Development, is relatively unique among the certificate’s offerings because it is one of three identity-based courses offered, which situates leadership learning among salient identities.

Hopefully this course can serve as a blueprint for other institutions to create such a leadership learning opportunity. The Latinx Leadership Development course was created to provide spaces for diverse students to deeply discuss and therefore learn about leadership from multiple cultural lenses. In our research, only a few other institutions offer such a course including DePaul University, University of Maryland- College Park, and University of Central Florida.

The Latinx Leadership Development course at Florida State University is grounded in leadership learning and being a leader through the lens of someone identifying as Latinx. The purpose of this course is to not only provide voice to Latinx leaders, but also to provide an opportunity for all students (both Latinx and non-Latinx) to incorporate a new framework of leadership theory and practice. The class meets twice a week for 75 minutes. The course enrollment is limited to 18 students to allow for intimate discussions. The size of the class allows the instructor to provide focused attention on each student and fosters a manageable workload for both the instructor and the students.

The required text in this course is *The Power of Latino Leadership* where Bordas (2013) defines Latino leadership as “one of coalition building, bringing people together, working across sectors, and embracing a consciousness of partnership. Latino leaders leverage the power of inclusion” (p. xi). She also outlines 10 Latino leadership principles consisting of *personalismo* (the character of the leader), *conciencia* (knowing oneself and personal awareness), *destino* (personal and collective), *la cultura* (culturally based leadership), *de colores* (inclusiveness and diversity), *juntos* (collective and community stewardship), *¡adelante!* (global vision and immigrant spirit), *sí se puede* (social activism and coalition leadership), *gozar la vida* (leadership that celebrates life), and *fe y esperanza* (sustained by hope and faith) (Bordas, 2013, pp. 14-16).

The learning outcomes for Latinx Leadership Development center on a series of competencies that

students who participate in the course are expected to demonstrate. Upon completion of the course, students should be able to:

- Critically analyze Latinx leadership theory and research and how those concepts can be applied in their personal and professional leadership development.
- Discuss aspects of Latin American history and famous Latinx leaders, foundation of Latinx leadership and its emergence throughout the years.
- Reflect on current topics and trends in Latinx culture, history, and news, and apply leadership concepts to their critical analysis.
- Analyze the human experience of Latinx people from multiple lenses, specifically in the framework of leadership.
- Explore one’s own cultural norms or values of Latinx Leadership in relation to those of a different cultural group (Florida State University, 2017).

By focusing on these learning outcomes, students work towards becoming active participants in the cultivation of their leader identity, capacity, and efficacy. This holistic development prepares students to successfully engage with leadership processes in a variety of contexts.

Voices from the Latinx Leadership Development Course

When teaching leadership with a culturally relevant lens, the experiences and backgrounds of students, the learners, are a critical part of the leadership curriculum (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016). A good practice in teaching leadership is allowing time and space for reflection. As noted in the leadership learning framework, opportunities for metacognition, in which students are able to apply what they have learned to their own experiences, has the capacity to

create an engaging and thought-provoking learning environment (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Reflection was a consistent pedagogy and learning assessment in the Latinx Leadership Development course at Florida State University. When asked to reflect on why they were enrolled in this course, students said:

- I'm taking this class to not only further my knowledge in leadership but also create a larger understanding about how diversity plays a role in leadership.
- I have a Hispanic ethnicity (my mom is from Puerto Rico). I would like to take this class because I would like to explore leadership from this identity.
- To learn more about Latinx figures and movements going on because I can't think of many at all which isn't good.
- I want to take this class because I need to be inspired. I'm active in my community but I'm feeling drained.
- Being a Latino student, I would like to learn about Latinx history and leadership, especially because it isn't discussed in school.
- I want to take this class to understand my culture better. Also, to learn how to not water-down my heritage when wanting to lead a group of people.

These responses were helpful to construct the classroom environment and curriculum. By the instructor asking and students responding, students become co-creators of their learning experience, therefore further connecting to their leadership learning. Reflection prompts and activities can also be used to measure the learning outcomes of the students. As with any curriculum, aligning the classroom experience with the learning objectives of the course can help instructors assess how their students are receiving the course material. The following are responses from a reflection prompt pertaining to students' observations and experiences with the class at the midway point of the semester:

- Not only have I connected with my culture a lot more but being in a class surrounded by leaders gives me a lot of good info and examples on what I am capable of in the coming years.
- I've felt validated throughout the semester.
- I think my favorite thing about it is how much it's allowed me to learn/discover things about myself that I would've never thought about.
- Me siento a gusto con esta clase y la manera en como la manejan y la enseñan. Pienso que ayuda a muchas personas a descubrir quienes son de verdad. (I'm happy with this class and how it's laid out and taught. I think it will help many people discover themselves)
- Course does a good job at making me reflect on myself. I didn't know much at all about Latinx problems, so learning anything is valuable to me. Also, I'm aspiring to go to Med school so while this isn't in my field whatsoever, this class is helping me become more worldly, and even improving my communication skills.
- It's very close knit and I feel comfortable sharing how I feel.

The reflection responses above align with the learning objectives of the course. Students commented on leadership development, learning about current Latinx issues, exploring their own values, and their ability to apply leadership concepts to their own leadership practices. Obtaining continuous feedback from students will provide them with ownership of their class and leadership learning. It can also aid the instructor in ensuring the teaching material is culturally relevant and current.

In leadership learning, students come into a learning space with perceived notions of leadership

based on their experiences, observations, and the environments they are in. Leadership learning becomes even narrower through a Latinx leadership lens, in which cultural practices and norms are integrated into leadership practices and definitions of leadership. The responses to the prompts are examples of how leadership learning is socially constructed and can be influenced by one's own way of being. Instructors can use their classroom to bring together varying ideologies of leadership and integrate how Latinx leadership can play a role in students' perspectives of leadership.

Implications and Recommendations for Latinx Leadership Learning

From lessons learned while developing, offering, and assessing the Latinx Leadership Development undergraduate course, several implications and recommendations emerged. These implications and recommendations include the need for educator self-work, the importance of collaboration, the creation of intentional learning environments, and the influence of institutional responses to diversity and inclusion.

Educator Self-Work

Leadership educators' self-work is critical to maximizing Latinx leadership learning. To teach and administer a Latinx leadership class, leadership educators need to have a general understanding of Latinx culture and community, especially as it consists of sub-cultures with specific customs, practices, and traditions. Some questions to consider are: Are institutions of higher education encouraging this culturally based practice of leadership or a culturally relevant way of helping Latinx students develop their leader identity? Are Latinx students aware of not only these principles, but how their Latinx upbringing and culture has approaches to leadership and has influenced how they developed their leader identity (Torres, 2019)?

It should be clear that it is not solely the duty of faculty and staff of color to support Latinx student population, and institutions of higher education

cannot place these expectations on their faculty and staff of color (Torres, 2019). Therefore, White faculty need to do their own self-work in culturally relevant leadership learning, as well as how to navigate potential White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) in identity-based courses. As DiAngelo (2018) explains, White fragility is when White individuals are triggered by even minimal challenge to the White position they hold; essentially, they are fragile in the conversation of their privilege. As much as some students or campuses may prefer an instructor of Latinx descent, it is imperative to consider that faculty and staff of color are not the only ones engaged in identity-based work and classes. This educator self-work is necessary in maximizing student leadership learning among both Latinx and non-Latinx students in the course.

Collaboration

Collaboration is another way to enhance leadership learning opportunities and support leadership learning for Latinx students. One recommendation is to work with university Latinx studies departments and/or Latinx cultural centers (Torres, 2019). These departments can provide additional resources and support when working with Latinx students. Instructors can consist of staff members, administrators, and faculty regardless of identity affiliation only if they are open to learning and including diverse voices and experiences into their classroom (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016; Torres, 2019).

Another recommendation is to bring in guest speakers who are knowledgeable about the topics being covered in class and can serve as an additional resource and source of knowledge. Since Latinx leadership is highly relational, this teaching tool reinforces the collaborative nature of leadership learning, Guest speakers can consist of university faculty and staff, community partners, and external educators and professionals who work with Latinx population and/or are of Latinx descent (Torres, 2018). Leadership educators can also collaborate with campus partners in marketing programs and resources directed towards Latinx students.

Marketing identity-based courses can be key for successful enrollment. Leadership educators must take the time to get to know the Latinx community at their institution and engage collaborative partners.

Creating Intentional Learning Environments

Although creating intentional learning environments is critical for enhancing leadership learning opportunities for all students, this is especially true for Latinx students. Leadership educators can learn from the advisors and student affairs administrators who work with student organizations in order to better understand the challenges and successes of Latinx students' sense of belonging on college campuses. For some Latinx students, the classroom, specifically in a Latinx leadership class, can serve as a space of affirmation and community. Leadership educators must be diligent when constructing their classroom spaces and make sure it directly and indirectly supports intergroup dialogue and community. For example, leadership educators can start their semester with a group expectations list so everyone in the classroom is on the same page. This can be created in conjunction to the learning objectives of the course and it should be encouraged that students are part of creating this list. If possible, the leadership educator can maneuver the classroom space by making sure the set-up of the room consists of a conference square and/or clusters or tables that encourage group and instructor interaction.

Another recommendation for creating intentional learning environment is critically thinking about what instructional strategies should be used. One idea for leadership educators is to practice *sentipensante* pedagogy, which challenges traditional ideologies of classroom teaching and learning. In lecture-style teaching, students are not given the time to interact with one another and would act as receivers of knowledge. With *sentipensante* pedagogy, students are the lead facilitators in classroom discussions, and faculty members engage with their students in the discussion (Rendón, 2009). By sharing their own experiences and becoming more vulnerable in how they teach, leadership educators have the capacity to

motivate and inspire their students (Torres, 2018). To create intentional learning environments, leadership educators should also become familiar with their institution's stances and resources pertaining to diversity and inclusion practices.

Institutional Responses to Diversity and Inclusion

Beyond hiring diverse faculty and staff, it is also important to consider how your institution responds to diversity and inclusion topics and even missteps that may occur. Some Latinx students arrive to campus with a leader identity and experience in leadership development practices. However, these teachings and ways of being are often not reinforced or supported as they transition into campus life. Leadership educators need to be aware of the shift in identity and expectations for Latinx students who have a strong leader identity development or are requiring more support in the college transition process.

As new generations of Latinx students come to our campuses, so too will new issues pertaining to this population. When issues arise, particularly societal issues that can negatively impact this population, institutions need to prepare to respond appropriately. It is critical to provide inclusive spaces on campus and to make sure Latinx students feel like they are safe and supported by their peers, faculty, staff, and administrators. If an institution commits to creating change and supporting this population, they need to enhance their responses to diversity and inclusion efforts, especially when those efforts are challenged by marginalized students. Latinx students need the full support of the university through forms of mentorship, programs, and resources, especially when they are facing continuing marginalization and invalidation.

Conclusion

Leadership educators should critically examine ways in which Latinx students are absorbing aspects of leadership learning. It is the leadership educators' role to think outside of traditional classroom-

based teaching and honor students as sources of knowledge. Some of the best practices in creating a Latinx leadership course consist of the integration of various pedagogical practices, campus partners, and student's leadership experiences. The sharing of stories and personal anecdotes can become a powerful learning tool in a Latinx leadership classroom.

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