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

Abstract

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

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

Introduction

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

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

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

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

The following research questions were explored in this study:

1. How do participants conceptualize the concept of leadership and describe their development as leaders?
2. What change, if any, occurred in participants' leadership characteristics and behaviors over the course of the programs?
3. How, if at all, do participants' perceptions of leadership align with the changes in their leadership characteristics and behaviors?

Methodology

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

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

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

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

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

Qualitative Design.

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

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

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

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

Quantitative Design.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Findings

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

Qualitative Findings

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

Good Leadership is Acting Collaboratively and Supportively Toward a Goal. During the analysis of participant narratives in the six focus group interviews, the researchers identified 19 codes under the category of the actions related to good leadership. These codes related to actions such as building relationships, engaging others, delegating tasks, managing time, and speaking publicly. When considering all six focus groups, the most prominent and most frequent codes were accomplishing goals, active listening, communicating effectively, putting others first, collaborating, supporting/helping, taking charge, and problem-solving. Aligning directly with the idea of shared leadership, a key part of good leadership according to the participants was the focus of the leader in guiding followers and teammates in accomplishing a shared goal. In emphasizing the fact that a leader must set goals for themselves and their unit/team, a member of the Prevention Group suggested that “a leader is like a trusted individual that understands the common goal and tries to help a group of people get to the goal” (Focus Group 2). Similarly, a student from the Senior Group said, “A leader is someone who takes it upon themselves to solve a problem or guide a group of people to solve some issue” (Focus Group 2).

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Quantitative Findings

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

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Table 1
Self-Pre-Post Assessment Results

	Means		*SD*		*Significance*	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Corr	2 tailed t-test
Model the Way						
Models personal example	3.53	4.12	1.138	0.791	0.307	0.001*
Holding others accountable	3.00	3.67	1.131	0.973	0.018*	0.002*
Demonstrates self-awareness	3.35	4.02	1.180	0.836	0.378	0.000*
Ability to mediate	3.10	3.75	1.153	0.935	0.116	0.002*
Expresses values	2.86	3.33	1.249	1.052	0.446	0.008*
Inspire a Shared Vision						
Communicates beliefs	3.04	3.88	1.160	0.940	0.379	0.000*
Capability to describe	2.67	3.49	1.089	0.987	0.081	0.000*
Expresses vision	3.18	3.65	1.195	1.016	0.036*	0.034*
Verbalizes personal interests	2.78	3.45	1.238	1.026	0.062	0.004*
Challenge the Process						
Challenges others	3.29	3.75	1.101	1.036	0.277	0.016*
Inquisitive	2.76	3.55	1.050	0.757	0.367	0.000*
Innovative	2.78	3.67	1.006	0.841	0.575	0.000*
Learns from experiences	2.49	3.35	1.155	1.074	-0.126	0.001*
Initiates experiments	2.75	3.53	1.093	1.172	0.453	0.001*
Enable Others to Act						
Fosters relationship building	3.78	4.33	1.189	0.766	0.278	0.002*
Respectful	4.65	4.86	0.483	0.348	0.302	0.004*
Trusting	3.45	3.82	1.026	0.910	0.280	0.027*
Promotes team building	3.24	3.69	1.210	1.068	0.492	0.007*
Encourage the Heart						
Encourages others	3.84	4.25	1.155	0.891	0.448	0.010*
Expresses appreciation	3.88	4.22	0.993	0.832	0.177	0.049*
Publicly recognizes others	2.96	3.33	1.341	0.973	0.409	0.045*

Note: N = 51 participants
1 = Rarely, 2 = Once in a while, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Very frequently
**Correlation is significant, 0.05 level (two-tailed) for all pre-post measures*
***Overall average of means for Exemplary Leadership Practice*

Observer SLPI Results. The Observer SLPI, which was filled out by each program's facilitator at the beginning and end of the program, found statistically significant differences between pre- and post-assessment at the $p < .05$ level

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(two-tailed) for 14 of the 30 practices (see Table 2). The *Encourage the Heart* category had the greatest number of statistically significant data points (5 of 6) between the pre-test and post-test. None of the practices revealed statistical significance at the $p < .05$ level for the paired sample correlations, and one practice *exhibits reliability*, part of the *Model the Way* category, indicated a negative correlation.

Table 2
Observer Pre-Post Assessment Results

	Means		***SD***		***Significance***	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Corr	2 tailed t-test
Model the Way						
Holding others accountable	2.84	3.17	1.309	1.353	0.709	0.017*
Exhibits reliability	4.09	4.40	1.031	0.972	-0.070	0.112
Demonstrates self-awareness	2.95	3.28	1.317	1.254	0.678	0.019*
Ability to mediate	2.95	3.52	1.515	1.128	0.766	0.000*
Inspire a Shared Vision						
Passionate	3.95	3.69	1.115	1.273	0.779	0.018*
Challenge the Process						
Learns from experiences	2.95	3.67	1.248	0.98	0.631	0.000*
Flexible	3.21	3.52	1.373	1.112	0.641	0.033*
Enable Others to Act						
Supportive	3.40	4.19	1.426	0.868	0.548	0.000*
Trusting	3.47	4.36	1.536	0.788	0.453	0.000*
Promotes team building	3.66	4.02	1.332	1.263	0.775	0.003*
Encourage the Heart						
Complimentative	2.62	2.91	1.295	1.354	0.731	0.026*
Expresses appreciation	2.91	3.41	1.044	1.217	0.581	0.001*
Publicly recognizes others	2.52	2.95	1.217	1.262	0.611	0.004*
Celebrates	2.53	2.97	1.327	1.297	0.571	0.009*
Creatively recognizes others	2.39	2.88	1.360	1.44	0.727	0.001*

Note: N = 58 participants
1 = Rarely, 2 = Once in a while, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often, 5 = Very frequently
**Correlation is significant, 0.05 level (two-tailed) for all pre-post measures*
***Overall average of means for Exemplary Leadership Practice*

Self and Observer Data Differences. Taken together, there were only seven out of 30 leadership practices across the five categories that had statistically significant differences for both participants (self) and facilitators (observer) throughout the programs: *holding others accountable, demonstrate self-awareness, ability to mediate, learns from experiences, trusting, expresses appreciation,* and *publicly recognizes others*.

When the mean differences between self and observer assessments were compared at face value, the data showed differences for two of the categories: *Challenge the Process* and *Encourage the Heart*. The

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pre-assessment data indicated that students on average ranked themselves lower (2.96) in the category *Challenge the Process* than did the observers (3.49). Conversely, in the category *Encourage the Heart,* the observers on average ranked students lower (2.69) in the pre-assessment than the students ranked themselves (3.59). Taking all five categories together, evaluation of the mean of difference scores for the self-assessment increased by 13% (3.38 to 3.82), whereas the observers' average of mean score only increased by 7% (3.31 to 3.53).

Then-and-Now Analysis. In the evaluative then-and-now survey administered to understand participants' perceptions of their learning and behavior changes from the beginning of the program to the end, the overall mean of difference scores for both categories, *Knowledge* and *Behaviors*, showed an increase between pre- and post-program participation with *Knowledge* having the larger gain (1.13) compared to *Behavior* (0.63) (see Table 3). Of the subcategories for *Knowledge*, *support my community* had the largest gain at 44% (3.24 to 4.69). For the *Behavior* category, *living out values of Monument* revealed the largest gain in the mean of the difference scores at 30% (3.62 to 4.70). The comparison of the surveys showed evidence of the programs having an effect on the knowledge and behaviors associated with the students' leadership development. Following completion of the program, all subcategories of *Knowledge* were ranked between "Familiar" and "Very Familiar" and all of the *Behavior* subcategories were ranked between "Often" and "All the time."

Table 3
Then and Now Survey Results

	Means		***SD***		***Significance***	
	Then	Now	Then	Now	Corr	2 tailed t-test
KNOWLEDGE						
Good Leader	3.43	4.69	0.781	0.510	0.397	.000*
Effective Leaders Act	3.53	4.45	0.833	0.642	0.554	.000*
Substance Use & Abuse	3.25	4.55	1.074	0.702	0.447	.000*
Meaning of Integrity	3.69	4.45	0.927	0.642	0.578	.000*
Support My Community	3.24	4.69	0.951	0.510	0.073	.000*
*****Knowledge average means***	***3.43***	***4.57***				
BEHAVIOR						
Accepting Others	4.47	4.80	0.674	0.401	0.718	.000*
Demonstrating Integrity	4.04	4.55	0.747	0.541	0.589	.000*
Living Out Values of Monument	3.62	4.70	0.923	0.463	0.396	.000*
Being Honest	3.69	4.49	0.883	0.579	0.503	.000*
Seeking Joy & Happiness Other than Substances	4.31	4.75	1.010	0.688	0.664	.000*
*****Behaviors average means***	***4.03***	***4.66***				

Note: N = 51 participants
Knowledge: 1 = Not familiar, 2 = Slightly familiar, 3 = Somewhat familiar, 4 = familiar, 5 = Very familiar
Behavior: 1 = Not at all, 2 = A little, 3 = Occasionally, 4 = Often, 5 = All the time
*Correlation is significant, 0.05 level (two-tailed) for all pre-post measures

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Integrated Findings

In analyzing how the students' characteristics and behaviors align with their perceptions of leadership (including their definitions of what good leadership entails and their personal experiences) a joint display of the findings is useful. Table 4 presents the comparison of the statistically significant findings from the SLPI pre- and post-assessments to the codes from the focus group interviews.

Table 4
Joint Display Table

Quantitative Findings Based on SLPI (statistically significant)	Matching Qualitative Codes and Themes
Model the Way	
• Models personal example • Holding others accountable • Demonstrates self-awareness • Ability to mediate • Expresses values	• Taking charge • Being self-aware • Acting collaboratively
Inspire a Shared Vision	
• Communicates beliefs • Capability to describe • Expresses vision • Verbalizes personal interests	• Speaking publicly • Active listening • Accomplishing goals
Challenge the Process	
• Challenges others • Inquisitive • Innovative • Learns from experiences • Initiates experiments	• Putting others first • Taking charge • Being courageous • Problem solving
Enable Others to Act	
• Fosters relationship building • Respectful • Trusting • Promotes team building	• Inclusive/Accepting/Understanding • Being respectful • Acting collaboratively
Encourage the Heart	
• Encourages others • Expresses appreciation • Publicly recognizes others	• Engaging others • Being respectful • Supporting/helping

In presenting the joint display, key findings from the qualitative data that did not match with any of the quantitative findings included the emphasis on overcoming challenges, in particular fear and all of the many personal, school-related, and extracurricular challenges faced by these student leaders.

Discussion

This section includes a discussion of the findings in relation to the research questions followed by a summary with implications for further research and practice.

How Do Participants Conceptualize Leadership and Describe Their Development as Leaders? Over the years, leadership researchers have proposed different approaches to defining leadership, among the most prominent being the trait approach, behavior approach, situational approach, and transformational approach (see Bass & Avolio, 1990; Blake & Mouton, 1964; Blanchard, 1985; Zaccaro, 2007). In defining leadership as part of this research study, focus group participants discussed several of these approaches, but they mostly focused on the trait and the behavioral approaches, namely on leadership as a set of actions (e.g., collaborating, actively listening, problem-solving) and a set of qualities (e.g., authentic, open-minded, self-aware).

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While different scholars include varying categories and types of leadership behavior, a common way to categorize leadership behaviors is through two categories: relationship- and task-oriented behaviors (Blake & Mouton, 1964). In line with these approaches, this study's findings can also be categorized under these two behavior types. Goal accomplishment, problem-solving, overcoming challenges, and acknowledging failure would fall under the task-oriented behaviors, while active listening, good communication, collaboration, and putting others first would be relationship-oriented. Overcoming challenges and being courageous is crucial characteristic for young leaders to develop especially in today's ever-changing society. Resilience allows leaders to rely on inner strength to overcome a setback or other misfortune such as dealing with a global pandemic. Resiliency may also increase a leader's self- efficacy by learning from the situation. Considering the balance of both relationship- and task-oriented behaviors on the list of desirable leadership behaviors and attributes, one could conclude that the student leaders interviewed in this study would argue the importance of both leadership types. Although the students described leadership similarly before and after their participation in the programs, some differences between groups were noticeable; specifically, post-groups were more descriptive in describing leadership and offered specific personal examples. Additionally, the Senior Group, whose participants had also participated in either the Inclusion and Prevention Program the previous year, had more experience from which to draw when discussing leadership.

What Change Occurred in Participants' Leadership Characteristics and Behaviors Over the Course of the Programs? Overall, the quantitative data suggest that the participants experienced significant change in their leadership behaviors at the end of their participation in the leadership development programs. The five SLPI categories all showed evidence of statistical significance in various leadership practices and provided evidence of the programs likely contributing to the development of leadership knowledge and behavior amongst the student participants. The participants were more confident in leadership elements such as inspiring others, coming up with new ideas, learning from their experiences, recognizing and celebrating others. It is important to note, however, that given the non-experimental nature of this study, no causal relationship can be made exclusively between the programs offered by Monument and the statistically significant changes according to the SLPI. These changes could have been influenced by other activities and experiences that occurred throughout the year. Given that these students had to apply to the programs at Monument, it is likely that they were somewhat predisposed to growing as leaders.

How Do Participants' Perceptions of Leadership Align with the Changes in Their Leadership Characteristics and Behaviors? The joint display of the qualitative and quantitative findings (Table 4) shows considerable data alignment. The greatest overlap is seen for the first category from the SLPI, which is fully supported by the qualitative data (when considering the themes "Good Leadership is Acting Collaboratively and Supportively Toward a Goal" and "Good Leadership is Being Authentic, Open-Minded, Self-Aware, and Courageous" jointly). While qualitative data collected from focus group interviews also supports the quantitative results for the other four categories from the SLPI, several points were unique to the quantitative inventory and did not emerge in the focus group interviews. Specifically, while the focus group participants discussed the importance of learning from personal experiences, inquisitiveness and innovativeness are two qualities from the inventory which were not mentioned in the interviews. Furthermore, despite team building being a key focus in the SLPI, the focus group interviews did not mention teambuilding explicitly. Instead, the qualitative data focused more on components of team building such as listening, relationship building, and collaboration.

Lastly, one important skill that the participants listed as influenced by the program participants was public speaking; however, they did not go so far as to discuss the focus of the speech (e.g., recognizing others), as was the case in the inventory. A point of contrast between the quantitative and qualitative findings pertained to a point from the second category in the SLPI, namely, "verbalizes personal interests." While this was a significant point from the quantitative data, focus group participants spoke of the need for leaders to devote their attention toward the interests of the group and a common goal. This is potentially the result of the fact that the leadership development programs offered by Monument were offered in a shared leadership context where no leader was set among the various programs. This likely heightened the participants' awareness of the need to focus on group interests and goals over personal interests and goals.

Limitations

There are several important limitations to this research design that emerged in various dimensions of the study. First, given the non-random and relatively small sample size, the results may not be generalizable or applied to broad contexts. For purposes of this study, the phenomena of leadership development were described in a specific context or site (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2017) and results may be

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transferrable to comparable contexts. A limitation of the quantitative portion of this study is that the SLPI might not adequately measure all aspects of leadership development across the three programs at Monument. For example, participants spoke in the focus groups about the importance of overcoming fear and obstacles, but the questions on the SLPI do not directly measure these factors. Thus, content validity (Reynolds et al., 2018) is potentially a concern with the quantitative phase of the study despite the SLPI being widely accepted and having demonstrable psychometric properties. In future studies, the research team could supplement the SLPI by creating additional survey items (as with the Then-and-Now survey) to measure changes in leadership development beyond the five practices in the SLPI.

Additionally, the qualitative data were limited by the questions asked in the focus group interviews. The focus group questions were broad enough to allow participants to describe many facets of their leadership development. However, the participants barely alluded to some practices or failed to mention others at all (e.g., *initiates experiments* and *celebrates*). Thus, during the analysis stage, it was difficult to show all five categories and subcategories clearly in the qualitative data, which made comparison and integration of the results challenging. Future studies should consider including more targeted focus group interview questions inclusive of all components of the SLPI in order to measure students' leadership development in each practice area.

Implications and Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this mixed methods study show that during the municipal-based programs, the participants' perceptions, characteristics, and behaviors as leaders changed. This is significant because it expands the dialogue of student leadership development (focused mostly on formal educational settings and undergraduate students' experiences) to include non-formal settings and offers practitioners who work in those settings specific ideas of how such programs are affecting their participants. The findings also show that municipal-based programs may be beneficial for both the student leaders' development and the community.

Future researchers may consider exploring student leadership development in other non-formal settings across the globe and with different populations. In a period defined by the need to physically isolate due to a global pandemic, researchers may also consider examining how different modes of program delivery (i.e., in-person vs. virtual) may influence the success of the program. Considering the ever-changing global landscape, ensuring that young people are appropriately prepared to lead in a global environment is vital. Future research about leadership programs like the ones in this study should consider implementing a mixed methods design to fully understand participants' leadership development. For the qualitative phase of the study, researchers might wish to narrow the scope of the interview questions to highlight specific traits that their programs seek to develop. Studies focused specifically on the SLPI and its five main practices might consider creating interview protocols based on the SLPI survey items for the qualitative phase.

Similarly, future studies could examine how individual leaders grow in each SLPI practice. For example, researchers could explore whether participants experience larger gains in the practices they participated in the least before beginning the program or if they hone the practices they participated in most frequently before the program. Future research might also consider providing a more thorough investigation of a single leadership practice and how programs influence that trait. This study demonstrates how multiple leadership programs in a single agency allowed participants to cultivate leadership traits across several practices. By immersing the student leaders in event planning and programming, Monument broadens leadership experiences of participants and provides an environment that allows participants to improve self-esteem and self-efficacy. Lastly, future research could look at longitudinal data and track the alumni of these programs over time, especially given the fact that Monument's programs have operated for over 10 years.

As practitioners build and implement leadership development programs, they should consider which practices of leadership they would like to emphasize. The SLPI provides an established framework of leadership practices, although the findings of this study also indicated that participants in Monument groups noted additional gains beyond the five practices in the SLPI. Organizations wishing to understand how their programs contribute to the leadership development of their members might consider reflecting on their missions and priorities as they determine which leadership practices they wish to emphasize.

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