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"CHALLENGING THE PERCEPTION:" Alumni Observations of the Value of Student Leadership Initiatives

Abstract

The relative ubiquity of student leadership development programs in postsecondary education – supported at over 2,000 unique institutions globally – requires efforts to assess their outcomes commensurate with the investment made in them. This research study collected qualitative data from a group of 25 recently graduated undergraduate alumni who had participated in a broad range of formal leadership initiatives at a four-year public university. Our goal was to critically examine the degree to which they felt they developed leadership competencies necessary for their success in their current post-graduate professional roles. A common theme suggested that one of the most significant outcomes of participation was their capacity to develop an identity as a leader of their peers – gained from tearing down their pre-existing perceptions regarding what leadership entails and building a detailed and broader understanding. Several respondents identified the indirect benefit of participating with a diverse group of peers, especially regarding building working relationships across personal difference. Not all respondents, however, possessed positive experiences. Several failed to make connections from the "fun" curriculum to their professional responsibilities. Underrepresented students specifically experienced marginalization and challenges feeling included. We discuss the implications of these findings and suggestions for future improvement.

Introduction

Leadership development has come to be recognized as a foundational pillar of the modern college student's educational objectives (Andenoro, & Skendall, 2020; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Eich, 2008; Komives, et al., 2011). Indeed, an individual's ability to lead is commonly identified as a critical competency necessary for personal and professional success in our increasingly complex and interconnected global society (Seemiller, 2018). Today, it is incumbent upon higher education institutions to develop the leaders of tomorrow. Leaders who will regularly face ambiguous, and often volatile challenges in all sectors of modern

society and who must therefore possess capacities equal to the task of meeting such demands (Rimita et al., 2020). Contemporary leaders are called to be socially responsible, inclusive, open to diverse perspectives, decisive, yet collaborative (Seemiller, 2013). They are expected to hold mastery over leadership concepts and theories, while possessing the wisdom to expertly apply such knowledge in moments of crisis and uncertainty. Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to address the development of such capacities, providing opportunities for students to master leadership competencies and theories, as well as the practical experiences to apply such knowledge.

To meet these developmental demands, formal leadership training programs are now ubiquitous among higher education institutions nationwide, with more than 2,000 documented institutions formally participating (International Leadership Association, 2020). Despite these developmental efforts, few instances of alumni-based research have assessed the long-term impact on students who have participated in such programs, especially once they enter their professional lives. As our investments in student leadership development continue to increase, it is vitally important to accurately assess the value and outcomes of our efforts. The need is especially relevant given that recent evidence suggests that leadership development over time for students is likely to be non-linear and complex (Rosch & Stephens, 2017).

Considering these complexities, we believe that an approach that centers the perspectives of recent alumni – who were students recently enough to remember their experiences and firmly situated in their professional experiences – will enable greater accuracy in assessing formal leadership training programs in higher education. Rather than beginning by quantitatively assessing measures of pre-determined capacity, this study invited respondents to report the experiences and resulting learning that were most significant to their current development of leadership capacity. As a result, this article addresses current research gaps regarding the long-term impact of formal leadership training programs on undergraduate participants' future professional success.

Assessing "Impact" in Postsecondary Leadership Education. In today's political and economic climate, postsecondary institutions are under increased scrutiny to produce graduates who are adequately prepared to tackle contemporary global challenges (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Kuh, 2008). Measurements of adequate preparation are difficult to assess. Still, numerous scholars have illustrated a set of essential learning outcomes, including ethical reasoning and action, possessing intercultural knowledge and competence, and the ability to work in teams as key indicators (AAC&U, 2007). These outcomes, not coincidentally, consist of some of the primary objectives of contemporary leadership education initiatives among higher education institutions (Dugan, 2006; Parker & Pascarella, 2013). While numerous studies indicate that contemporary leadership education initiatives do help students develop these essential learning outcomes (Dugan & Komives, 2007), we know surprisingly little about students' lived experiences in formal leadership programs, and specifically about the particular pathways that students traverse on their journey to growth. This current study investigates students' lived experiences in postsecondary leadership development to understand how formal programming efforts contributes to their growth.

An attractive means for assessing broad-based student growth is engaging with an institution's recently graduated alumni. Alumni can serve as a rich resource for examining these developmental pathways and assessing the longitudinal outcomes of educational initiatives.

Educational programs in Business and Engineering schools have successfully utilized alumni to assess curriculum and program effectiveness (see Cabrera et al., 2005; Saunders-Smits & De Graaff, 2012). Leadership educators have also begun turning to recently graduated alumni to assess their development of leadership competencies and gauge program effectiveness (Beatty et al., 2021; Mitchell & Daugherty, 2019). However, these studies have primarily been quantitative in design, utilizing pre-post survey design on pre-determined outcome measures. Alumni studies rarely focus on the

developmental process that students experience on their unique pathways to competency mastery. Rarer still are studies that consider factors such as how students' social identities uniquely affect their pathways to growth. This current study focuses, in part, on the potential roles played by these factors in describing how leadership development occurs.

Attending to college students' social identities related to race, sexuality, gender, and educational generation status is critically important for educators as student demographics within higher education institutions continue to shift (Duran et al., 2020; Mayhew et al., 2016). Many past studies (e.g., Duran et al., 2020) suggest students from underrepresented backgrounds lack a sense of belonging on their campus, which may prevent them from equitable opportunity and feeling a sense of access to certain collegiate experiences. Such barriers to learning may be especially relevant in the field of leadership education, considering that people from underrepresented backgrounds have been absent or invisible in leadership contexts across broad swaths of our society for generations (Dugan, 2017; Owen, 2020), which may further hinder their sense of belonging in formal postsecondary leadership programs (Arminio, 2000). We feel that utilizing a qualitative approach in our study will provide necessary insight into students' developmental processes that contribute to the acquisition of specific leadership competencies.

A Contemporary Model of Leadership Development. Most higher education institutions today employ a post-industrial model of leadership in their educational initiatives (Owen, 2012), which Rost (1991) defined as a transition from traditional views of leadership that views leaders as strong individuals who push followers to achieve the leader's ends to a more relational model of leadership in which collaborators of all backgrounds work interdependently to achieve mutually desirable goals and affect societally beneficial change. Theoretical leadership models such as the Social Change Model of Leadership (Higher Education Research Institute, 1996) and the Relational Leadership Model (Komives et al., 1998) were specifically designed to attend to the developmental needs of college students and support the development of their capacity to lead in post-industrial ways (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Dugan, 2017). These models emphasize the need for students to develop the ability to collaborate, follow ethical practices, engage in inclusive communications and attitudes, and possess goals to improve society in socially responsible ways.

While all individuals experience challenges throughout their leadership development process, historically underrepresented students experience unique barriers that may further complicate their ability to develop such competencies, especially if they do not identify as a leader based upon culturally hegemonic assumptions of leader prototypes (Arminio, et al., 2000; Dugan & Leonette, 2021). Underrepresented students may also be overlooked for opportunities to develop their leadership capacity due to unconscious or conscious bias from leadership gatekeepers primed to uphold hegemonic leadership prototypes that unequally benefit White, cisgender males (Dugan, 2017; Dugan & Leonette, 2021). Within this current paper, our focus does not rest solely on underrepresented students, but given these problematic issues in student leadership education, we dedicated specific attention to social identity and background as part of our research process.

Research Questions

Within the scope of this paper, we define a "leadership program" to mean the comprehensive set of formal educational experiences within a postsecondary educational institution specifically designed to support student leadership development, generally including academic courses focused on leadership theory and concepts, and co-curricular initiatives like workshops, retreats, and speaker programs. Our research aims to understand the value formal leadership training programs provide to a diverse group of alumni regarding the development of their leadership capacity. To that end, this study seeks to answer two critical questions:

1. From the perspective of recently graduated alumni, how do formal leadership training programs support their leadership development and capacity to lead?

2. What leadership lessons do these alumni report learning as undergraduates, and what experiences do they attribute to this development?

Methods

Study Design. This study utilizes semi-structured interviews to investigate students' lived experiences in postsecondary leadership development to understand how formal programming efforts contribute to students' growth and how the broader postsecondary context might also motivate leadership learning. We use semi-structured interviews because they are an essential methodological tool for gaining insight into the nuanced experiences of the respondents (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). In this study, we gave the respondents an opportunity to share reflections on their experiences in leadership programs and an opportunity to talk about how these programs connect with leadership experiences in their co-curricular activities.

Sample. Participants for this study are alumni from a highly selective, research extensive Mid-Western public university who graduated between 2015 and 2019 and were selected for their involvement across four overlapping but administratively distinct types of formal leadership training initiatives: 1) An 18-credit hour academic Minor in Leadership Studies, where students from various majors and career goals enroll in a small series of formal courses covering self-awareness and self-management, group dynamics, ethical practices, organizational leadership, and social justice. 2) A non-transcriptable Leadership Certificate, consisting of two academic leadership courses, as well as a series of co-curricular leadership initiatives focused on a variety of topics (e.g., conflict management, ethics, systems thinking, and inclusive behaviors). In addition, participating students volunteer to spend time in teams and are paired with a non-student mentor to help them reflect on their learning and participate over several semesters. 3) The LeaderShape Institute, an immersive, multi-day co-curricular leadership training experience for matriculated students that takes place in an off-campus retreat setting. 4) Student employment at the campus leadership center, where students support the initiatives listed above and engage in their own developmental program. The Minor, Certificate, and Institute were all open to students from all academic majors, backgrounds, and prior leadership experiences, with applications or recommendations generally not required.

We selected recent alumni for this study to maximize accurate memory recall of collegiate experiences (Cabrera et al., 2005). To identify potential study participants, the campus's institutional advancement office provided a curated list of all 1,002 recent graduates recorded as having participated in one or more of the formal leadership training programs discussed above and graduated from the institution between 2015 and 2019.

Our recruitment process consisted of sending mass emails to the entire group, direct messages via LinkedIn as a follow-up, and selective email correspondence via campus administrators who volunteered to help the research team recruit participants. We first began our recruitment efforts with the 2019 graduate cohort before inviting the cohort that graduated between 2018 and 2015. Twenty-seven alumni indicated their willingness to participate in the study by completing a pre-interview survey and consent form. Of these, 25 alumni participated in the scheduling process and completion of a subsequent interview.

Of the 25 study participants, ten graduated in 2019, 13 in 2018, one in 2016, and one in 2015. Thirteen participants identified as (Caucasian/White), six as (LatinX/Hispanic), four as (Asian American), and two as (African American/Black). Eighteen individuals identified as as a woman and seven identified as a man. Six participants identified as first-generation college students. Twenty-four participants identified as heterosexual, and one participant identified as bisexual. These participants were roughly representative of the cohort of undergraduate students who engage in formal leadership programs at the postsecondary institution, where women outnumber men two to one, and slightly more than half of those who participate identify as White.

Procedures. We employed a semi-structured interview protocol with sub-questions tailored to the specific formal leadership training program in which alumni participated. Our interview questions focused on four thematic areas of student leadership development: *self-knowledge* (what the participant learned about themselves), *interpersonal relationships* (what the participant learned about working with others), *organizational competence* (what the participant learned about working in organizations), and *societal and community engagement* (what the participant learned about membership in the broader community) as experienced through formal leadership training programs. All interviews were conducted via video conference and recorded for future analysis and transcription. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes.

Researchers' Positionalities. We offer a brief statement regarding how our collective positionalities have informed our research efforts. Among the four research team members, one identifies as a White, cisgender man employed as a faculty member who studies postsecondary leadership education. Another identifies as a Black cisgender man also employed as a faculty member who studies the sociology of race and ethnicity. A third member identifies as a White, cisgender man enrolled as a graduate student research assistant studying higher education who has participated in formal leadership initiatives as an undergraduate student. The team's fourth member identifies as a White, cisgender woman positioned as a co-curricular leadership educator. These historical connections to the topic and context informed our communications in reaching out to prospective participants and guided our interviews and analyses.

Data Analysis

After 10 interviews were completed, one member of the research team transcribed the interviews using online transcription software, then manually checked the transcripts through playback of recordings and simultaneous reading and editing for accuracy. Once the transcriptions had been edited, two members of the research team analyzed and coded the interview data independently using a grounded theory approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Each analyst coded the interviews scouring the data for emergent thematic categories within the respondents' comments creating initial open codes. This process was repeated as additional interviews were collected and the coders utilized a constant comparative method, wherein they independently compared code categories creating axial codes and then developed research memoranda based on the ongoing process of coding (Charmaz, 2006). This allowed for a deeper analysis of the interconnection between initial and subsequent codes of each analyst as well as codes between the analysts.

The coders identified categories based on the respondents' discussions of topics like "leadership experience," "program participation," "co-curricular activities," and so forth. Once the coding was completed, the research team analyzed the code sheets and research memoranda and noted a significant degree of agreement between the two coders' original thematic categories and theoretical ideas about the leadership experiences of the study participants. The data were then grouped by category into individual files, allowing us to closely analyze and theorize about the relationships among categories based on the respondents' information. These analyses became the basis for our findings.

Results

Overall, we find that consistent with observations from Rosch and Stephens (2017), the respondents reported that sustainable leadership development, by and large, occurs through their participation in formal experiences. Further, our respondents' experiences are not necessarily linear, but take the shape of a patchwork of overlapping occurrences that give respondents greater depth of understanding about leadership and how to practice it more effectively. In the current analysis, we focus on our respondents' thoughts about their participation within a formal leadership program and reveal nuanced ways in which they: 1) learned more concisely what leadership entails, which allowed them to see more diverse ways of leading and critically reflect on and develop their own leadership identity; and 2) engaged with students from a variety

of backgrounds, which broadened their perspectives and gave them the skills for working across diversity broadly. At the same time, not all lessons learned were positive. Two additional themes emerged from our research: 3) underrepresented students were often marginalized from pathways to participation and faced challenges majority students do not, and 4) not nearly all participants saw the connections between formal program curriculum and exercising leadership in professional environments. We describe these key themes in the language employed by our respondents.

"Challenging the Perception I had of Myself" We observed consistently how our respondents, when talking about the curriculum in the formal leadership program, affirmed how their experiences led them to think more deeply about leadership concepts and their self-perception of their current leadership capacity, even in those cases where the respondent firmly considered themselves a capable leader before engaging in the leadership initiative. Priyank, who identifies as an Asian American male, provides interesting insights into how his course work in the university's leadership minor provided him with concrete aspirations for leadership.

> Um, it [course work] forced me to challenge the perception I had of myself, because it's very easy just in like an abstract cloud to be like, "You know what, I think I'd be good at leadership. Like, I think I got what it takes, I think I'm somewhat charismatic." And when you really look at it through a more academic lens, like "This is what other people do to be successful. This is how other people were good leaders or bad leaders," then it forces you to think about your own characteristics...So then, as soon as you hear about these things, in, in class, it's like, "Okay, this is who I am. These are the characteristics I want to embody." And it's a very concrete thing that you can aspire to, right...And it's like, "Okay, now I have these very, very specific words that I can strive towards." And it just, from my own personal experience, it gave me those ledges almost, like, "Okay, this is the next step that I need to get to." And of course, like on an abstract level, like, that's cool. I have, like, mental clarity.

In Priyank's case, he was someone who believed himself to be a leader, and yet defined leadership in narrow terms of characteristics like "charisma." His exposure to a curriculum that rigorously defines and describes the capacities required for effective leadership provided him with an opportunity to broaden his understanding and expand his capacity.

Other respondents also reflected upon the limited understandings of leadership that they possessed before participating in the program and how their learning affected their identity. David, who identifies as an Asian American male, notes that he learned that a leader "is not necessarily the person that's standing in front of the room, but there are like different types of leaders." Elias, who identifies as a LatinX male, recognizes the significance of the formal training received while pursuing the Leadership Minor while referencing the benefits of formal knowledge and vocabulary. For him, the training helps to improve the way he can communicate with others to achieve goals.

> ...I wouldn't be able to sit here and recite all the different leadership models that I learned. But learning all those and knowing that they're out there was valuable, and finding, and trying to apply all of what I've learned throughout those classes, and to my actual leadership style is pretty interesting as well. So, now, I'm just trying to, I use those classes to kind of figure out myself a little better to figure out how I can communicate better with individuals. So, I think that was pretty valuable...Like I wasn't trying to be like, "Oh, servant leadership is this or this or this, and now I need to be a servant leader." It wasn't like that. But it was just knowing that those resources are out there...to measure how I am as a leader.

When asked about the role of leadership studies classes in her development, Ebele, who identifies as an African American female, points out the importance of learning vocabulary associated with the practices of leadership.

> Yeah, we just learned about, for example, the different types of leadership, the leadership matrix, how to, I mean, the language you use when as you're a leader, and for example, not call people subor...subordinates or things like that. Just really learning about how, like language is important and learning about how just because you're a leader doesn't mean you know everything. You can learn as much from people who are under you as much as they can learn from you.

These respondents seem to recognize the interconnections among acquiring formal knowledge, the increase in vocabulary that accompanies such knowledge, and the changes in personal identity that might occur. Indeed, developing a more comprehensive understanding of what leadership is and a language to describe it has been suggested as a fundamental factor in students developing aspects of their leader identity (Komives, et al., 2005). According to Miscenko et al. (2017), *leader identity* describes the extent to which individuals view themselves as a leader and as someone who engages in leadership behavior. For Ebele, that identity might be built soundly around using the proper language for motivating, engaging, and inspiring one's team. As such, her identity as an emerging leader might be founded in a relational model of leadership that emphasizes language skills as a means to show mutual respect and proper communication to de-emphasize organizational hierarchy. Possessing such language is important because, as Ebele points out, "you can learn as much from people who are under you as much as they can learn from you." Hence, Ebele's formal training suggests the importance of language for bringing together collaborators of all social identities to achieve mutually desirable goals and societally beneficial change.

Although Elias is forthright about his inability to identify specific concepts from his previous courses, he recognizes the utility of those courses for his own leadership development. Elias views his training as "pretty valuable," not so much for its one-to-one applicability to specific leadership challenges in his current environment, but for its value as a tool for generalized skill-building and self-reflection. As indicated from our respondents' comments, this kind of self-reflection helps them develop their personal identity as a leader.

Similarly, other respondents reflected upon their initial limited thoughts regarding leadership. For instance, Vera, who identifies as a first-generation, LatinX female, says,

> I was intrigued by leadership. But I would say like I didn't know what leadership was at the time or like that anybody could be a leader or that it could be taught. I thought you had to be born one, or you have to be extroverted. So being a sophomore really early in my studies, I was definitely like, feeling very small, and being able to like go to the interview [at the leadership office] and then learn what I did the next two years definitely grew my philosophy of what I think leadership is.

Similarly, Carolina an elementary school teacher who identifies as a first-generation, LatinX female, states:

> [A] lot of the times, like, people think leaders, . . . [are] extremely outspoken, like extroverted and that's not always the case. So I did like [learn] that...you know, pretty much like anybody can be a leader.

Priyank indicates:

> But I'm definitely sure that the leadership classes had some part to play in cementing the idea that my empathy isn't a weakness. It is also a characteristic of a leader. Because always in popular media, you think like, "Oh, you have to be like, angry and gung-ho about your movements. And you have to like, be a strong leader, like Steve Jobs is so cool."... Being very powerful in your presence doesn't make, necessarily it doesn't make you a good leader. But people value those things way more than they value like, "Is this a good person trying to do a good thing?"

Unsurprisingly, the illustration of a strong, outspoken, extroverted, "gung-ho," "charismatic" person represents a pervasive idea that permeates popular culture regarding the stereotypical attributes of a leader. Numerous examples exist of the iconic representation of an aggressive, white, cisgender male leader of industry, enterprise, politics, art, and culture. Before many of our respondents engaged in formal leadership training, they seemed to have held these beliefs. Yet, based upon their reflections, they were able to expand their understanding of the identities of effective leaders to include people like themselves. Hence, for some of our respondents, formal leadership training provided them with an early opportunity in their postsecondary education to self-identify as a leader.

"Nothing to Do but Listen to Each Other"

Participants from all backgrounds within this study described benefits from engaging with others in formal programs who possessed identities different from them. Isabella, who identifies as a first-generation LatinX female, says,

> Yes, I feel like the one thing that I feel really stuck out with me was just because everyone came from different backgrounds, like we were all different majors, we all came from different parts of the university...[S]o I think it was definitely very diverse. And, you know, I don't think a lot of students really get put in a position where we have to interact with people that are of different backgrounds. So I think, you know, it's different from being maybe like in a classroom where everyone kind of, you know, gets assigned things. And we all do our own part to kind of, you know, get the grade. Occasionally, we might work together in teams, but this one is like you work on activities on building relationships, and having to work with one another. And then also getting into topics where we do have to share our own experiences and our own thoughts. So it's being mindful and being respectful of everyone and their own experiences as well.

Isabella's experience is such that the diversity of participants made her increasingly mindful of being respectful of others. Unlike in other university classroom experiences where the population might be less diverse or where student interactions might be less common, students engaged in formal leadership initiatives engage directly and more deeply interdependently with people they are not likely to engage with in other contexts.

Like Isabella, Nakeisha, who identifies as a first-generation African American female, and a participant of the LeaderShape Institute (which includes a retreat experience), sees the value of engaging with diverse groups of people for developing leader capacity. She says,

> And one thing about it too, is that it was just a very diverse group of people like, since like, when you're on campus, like you see so many different spaces, faces and you interact with, like, so many different people, like you don't really get to, like sit there and like really learn from the person or, you know, hear their experiences. So when you're put, like, in the middle of nowhere, like with a small group of people, like, you have no, nothing else to do, but to listen to each other. And there wasn't any TVs or anything like that. So, you know, it was just really cool, because we would stay up like during all hours of the night just engaging in conversations about like, our different experiences and perspectives. So it was really cool.

Beyond the immediate pleasure and enjoyment, Brent, who identifies as a white male, sees the future benefit of working with people from different backgrounds.

> Yeah, trying to think back to the kind of stuff that I learned, I guess, primarily was like, I guess, when I was like, in school, like, you, I just got so focused on like, you know, "these are the things that I need to get done," or do and you kind of like forgot about the broader picture. So it [participating in the program]

> was, for me, that was kind of a bigger piece of, it was like, remembering the broader picture remembering, like, there's all these different students out here with, you know, hundreds of different experiences, and, you know, that's part of leadership, right, like, you're gonna lead people that have very different experiences. So, for me, I think that was a big part of it.

The leadership training itself draws people from diverse backgrounds and offers participants an opportunity to work with diverse groups, whereas co-curricular activities within their college or academic major might more often situate them to interact with people similar to themselves.

"You Know What, I'm Gonna Say Something"

Although the past literature on leadership programs shows a demonstrable impact that students experience from participation in leadership programs (e.g., Dugan & Komives, 2007), some groups of students are challenged to reap the benefits from participation. In particular, historically underrepresented groups may be challenged by a lack of opportunity or limited exposure to such programs (Dugan, 2017; Owen, 2020). While our current study was not explicitly focused on students from historically underrepresented groups, we documented the perspectives of several alumni from marginalized identities who have completed the program. These alumni recognized the challenges to learning about leadership opportunities and subsequent challenges they faced once engaged. For example, one of our respondents, Carolina, talks about helping to identify potential leaders in elementary school, given these overall challenges.

> So we try to identify and help those students that are gifted and talented, and we focus more on like underrepresented groups so a lot of the research, a lot of the statistics show that like a lot of times...Latino, Black, Asian minorities are usually, like, underrepresented because sometimes it's the language or like so there's not like an educator that can communicate with them well, so a lot of times like they, they just, they're not identified...

Recognizing the challenges to identifying those capable underrepresented students, Carolina points out what she tries to do to create the opportunities to direct those students on a path to leadership. Carolina says:

> [W]e go through like the whole like checklist of like what categories they fall under and then one of them is leadership, but I'm like "There's not many opportunities that are here, present, that could actually help us identify those," it's more like kind of observational... trying to create those opportunities for the students to like see that leadership like, observe like those leaders, but also just like find those qualities within themselves...They're not really seeing that potential that they could have, and a lot of times these students like, they don't know or like nobody tells them until like way later on into their education, and I'm like, "Why don't we start now while they're in elementary school?"

As Carolina points out, it is a consistent challenge to expose students from underrepresented groups to potential opportunities for leadership. Indeed, much of the research conducted in the past two decades focused on differential leadership outcomes by groups of students has mostly been limited to comparing outcomes from participants from various identities and backgrounds. Although, by and large, our respondents identified positive aspects from their participation in the current program, there are times when issues arose that touched the core of their identities as underrepresented students, which complicated their experience. For instance, Ebele recalls a "very impactful" incident wherein she witnessed her friend be dismissed by a host—a white female—overseeing a guest visit of a mentor who came to lead a discussion on ethnicity. This experience made Ebele feel uncomfortable and agitated.

> One of the hosts or presenters, she actually, in the book [program workbook], it was printed . . . I think we were talking about, like ethnicities and something. And so I noticed

> that, because I mean, being the person I am [Black]. And my background, you start to notice things like when ethnicity is put wrong. And it was, it was, that was my learning experience of just because you're a leader, you're not right, and you have to learn to accept that you're not right. And so I was a little ticked off, and my friend was next to me. And she's like, "You know what, I'm gonna say something." And I was like, "Okay, go ahead." And she said something to the host. And she [the host], like, kind of brushed it off.

Although many students might experience being brushed off by people in authority, this experience was particularly impactful for Ebele as she watched her friend being dismissed when raising an issue within the discussion of race and ethnicity—central aspects of Ebele's identity. Within contexts like this, students might have a diminished sense of belonging when aspects of their social identities are handled less than graciously. Of course, numerous studies have shown how these experiences affect students' overall collegiate experiences (e.g., Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Yet, although Ebele considered this an important, albeit negative, moment in her experience in a formal leadership program, she was not deterred from continued participation in the program. In addition, the experience seemed to inform her perspective of leadership:

> "It really just show[ed] me that people are human. Like, that's essentially the whole thing about leadership. People are human. People make mistakes. But it's just about how you move forward with the advice you're given. And like I said, advice can come from anywhere, whether you're at the top or whether you're at the bottom, just be able to listen and correctly adjust to the criticism that you're given."

The lessons Ebele internalized from her participation highlight pathways to growth for students with experiences like hers while also indicating the need for administrators to build programs that more effectively addresses the needs of underrepresented students.

"It was Fun, but…" Heretofore our respondents have described the degree to which their formal participation, even if it was not always positive, led to their learning and growth as a leader. Still, not all our respondents expressed satisfaction with their experiences in formal leadership programs. Some viewed the exercises as impractical or not connected to "real life." For instance, Mei, who identifies as a first-generation Asian American female, had this to say about her experiences associated with her participation in formal co-curricular leadership programs.

> ...I guess it's good, that like we can get connected with other students and other professionals in the program and who care about leadership. I feel like that's the good thing about it. But to be really honest, I just feel like that the activities are not that like, practical like, at least for me like, yeah, I'm not sure about those...[W]e have a lot of like, team building activities, during those like program sessions. I mean, it was fun, but it was just hard for me to see how that might be applicable in real life.

It is disappointing that Mei expressed skepticism that the team-building activities she engaged in during her undergraduate leadership training applied to her current professional life, especially given the fundamental importance of learning how to work in teams during one's postsecondary education (AAC&U, 2007). While we do not know whether Mei was critiquing the curriculum design or the "feel" of the program, it seems clear for Mei that the team-building activities within the program fell short of her expectations for practical application in professional settings. A potential rationale for Mei's perspective could be that many team-building activities in postsecondary education are designed to be fun and playful. Likely, other participants in the program might well share Mei's disposition toward the lighter side of team building within formal leadership curricula.

Sarah, who identifies as a white female, shares Mei's observations regarding the limits on the practical application of the activities. She says,

> ...I think, overall, I feel like it [the program] would have been more impactful if it would have gone into more like, practical, or practical skills, rather than...I felt like it was very much like high-level, like, high-level concepts that you couldn't really apply unless you had that, that ground-level stuff.

Whereas Mei and Sarah point out the program's deficiencies based on their perceptions that certain activities add little to the practical application of leadership in professional settings, some respondents trusted that the actual value of those activities might come later in their professional life. For instance, Jaclyn, who identifies as a white female, shared, "I would imagine that they're, they're all valuable [all courses in the program]. Sometimes I feel like it just takes a little bit longer to recognize or see some of the value that it adds."

Discussion

Consistent with findings from past research (Komives et al., 2005), our findings suggest that participation in a formal leadership program directly led the respondents in our study to develop a leadership-focused language. For many of our participants, especially historically underrepresented alumni, such language served as the foundation for developing a leader identity. Furthermore, by expanding their leadership knowledge, alumni from this study were exposed to diverse ways of leading, providing a framework from which they could reflect upon their own leader identities and challenge the limited perceptions they held of themselves as leaders. For many alumni, participation in a formal leadership program offered them a rare opportunity to deeply engage and work with students of diverse backgrounds and perspectives. These collaborative experiences translated into deeper mutual respect and acceptance of individuals who do not share their background, leading to a heightened degree of inclusion and openness with their fellow students.

Findings from this study also uncovered continuing challenges in offering formal leadership programs. Some respondents from marginalized identities reported systemic obstacles to participation within formal leadership development opportunities. Even after being accepted to a formal program, their sense of belonging was challenged by gatekeepers in positions of formal authority, an experience similarly reported in past studies (Arminio, et al., 2000; Strayhorn, 2019; Vaccaro & Newman, 2016). Still, our respondents displayed resiliency and continued in their own leadership development process. These findings represent a reason to celebrate students' perseverance and, at the same time, a reason to challenge the longstanding issues in formal leadership programs regarding equity and social justice.

Some participants in this study expressed difficulty in bridging the connection between leadership knowledge and "real-world" application beyond the context of the formal leadership program. Our findings suggest that this is due, in part, to the typically playful nature of team-building activities and pedagogy in general offered through many formal leadership programs. Our respondents' perspectives may indicate a need to more effectively communicate to program participants how program activities contribute to skill development relevant in the post-graduate professional world.

Implications for practitioners. Stereotypical perceptions of the "charismatic" "gung-ho" leader have been ingrained in Western society, and especially in the United States, for at least as long as scholars have studied the concept of leadership (Offermann, et al., 1994). Our results suggest students who enter into formal postsecondary education already possess a portfolio of beliefs about what leaders look like and how they act. Unfortunately, research suggests those beliefs are outdated at best (Arminio, et al., 2000). The respondents in our study reported that one of the most impactful results of their participation in formal leadership programs was when they first recognized that their incoming beliefs about leading others were inappropriate and that, for example, "empathy isn't a weakness." Then, through further engagement, they developed a picture of leadership that could include

themselves within it. These results suggest leadership program architects might optimize the impact of their initiatives by focusing curriculum on an inclusive set of characteristics leaders should possess and then supporting participants as they critically reflect on their possession and development of these characteristics. Unfortunately, research on postsecondary leadership education pedagogy trends suggests that reflective and self-assessment activities are employed by classroom educators far less often than more popular techniques like interactive lectures or exams and quizzes (Jenkins, 2013). These results suggest program architects might benefit from strategically redeploying some of their pedagogical focus.

Our results also suggest the importance of personal context within leadership curriculum in supporting student learning, not only in developing an identity as a leader but also in making the transition to the professional world of work. In essence, the respondents in our study who spoke positively about their learning experiences in formal training could translate such training to their current roles; those who were critical about the benefits of their time spent lacked such translation. Our experiences as educators have shown us that many undergraduate students lack deep insight regarding what full-time post-graduation employment entails. The comments from our critical respondents suggest the need for leadership program architects to illustrate the world of work more explicitly and explain more deeply how the skills students might learn from a particular experience can support their success in the future. In particular, more detailed debriefing of such experiences might provide benefits.

The results of our study might also highlight the crucial role of creating a culture of inclusivity and "cultural responsiveness" within leadership education (Chunoo & Callahan, 2017). Many of our respondents took lasting lessons from experiences that taught them how to connect with people from different backgrounds and perspectives. Optimizing the degree to which productive, authentic interactions occur in leadership programs is not likely to occur without intentionally building a culture of inclusiveness where evidencing difference is valued. Moreover, our data indicated, not surprisingly, students from underrepresented backgrounds might build complicated relationships with the programs and the educators who offer them. Importantly, cultural responsiveness requires more than simply increasing the structural diversity in attendance at programs; it requires educating the educators on legacies of inclusion and exclusion and providing them skills to build a culture of justice and equity within their programs. To be sure, students like Ebele may take away valuable lessons of patience and humanity from feeling marginalized as a program participant, while others without her resilience likely internalize different outcomes.

Implications for researchers. Our findings suggest potentially valuable insights for institutional program assessment and curricular reform. In addition, this study suggests numerous avenues for future research. For instance, our results imply that developing a leader identity might precede the emergence of leader behaviors. Formal leadership programs are uniquely positioned as a catalyst for such identity development, especially for historically underrepresented students. However, subsequent research is needed to understand the connections between leader identity development and participation in formal programs. These connections may have implications for how formal leadership curricula should be structured and for student leadership development theory-building.

Considering the complexity and non-linear nature of student leadership development (Rosch & Stephens, 2017), further research is needed to explore the interconnections of participation in formal leadership programs and how students learn to lead within the rest of their postsecondary education experiences. Such research could help higher education administrators fully understand how to collectively leverage curricular and co-curricular experiences for professional leadership development. Our study might also highlight an underutilized resource in higher education student research: attending to alumni perspectives. Their perspectives seem a valuable yet untapped resource to understand the impact of a postsecondary education.

We further recognize that findings from this study, based on a diverse set of formal training initiatives

situated within a single, highly selective university campus, represent a categorical minority of potential environments in postsecondary education. Therefore, similar research should be conducted within different institutional contexts to determine if emergent themes from this study arise in parallel.

Limitations. Although we were able to learn much from the respondents as they shared insights from their leadership experiences, we recognize limitations with the current study. First, we employ a qualitative methodology which provides insightful information regarding student leadership development, but these findings are not generalizable. Specifically, our small, nonrandom sample, from a single institution, and a subpopulation of alumni does not allow us to generalize beyond the specific case under consideration. Hence our findings may only be suggestive of the ways in which similarly placed individuals are experiencing formal leadership initiatives at other institutions. Second, the identification of "recent alumni" is imprecise since it could be argued that alumni from four-plus years are not, in fact, recent. Still, we recognize that graduates with less time away from their leadership training experience will be unlikely to articulate the impact of that experience. Despite these limitations, the current study has provided us with an opportunity to glean how alumni are thinking about their leadership experiences. These insights are valuable to the extent that they give us a sense of what recent alumni view as important in leadership initiatives.

Conclusion

This research study paints a more descriptive picture of the lessons that undergraduate students take away – or do not take away – from their experiences within formal curriculum designed to support the development of their leadership capacity. Few remembered specific theories or detailed concepts only a few years after graduating and joining a professional environment. However, many respondents spoke in detail regarding how their understanding of what it means to lead in contemporary society expanded and deepened, allowing them to develop a more structured leader identity and the skills to critique and assess their development. They also indicated the significance of participating in a diverse cohort of peers and described how these peers helped them build skills in sustaining working relationships with those different from them. However, not all outcomes were positive. A few students expressed skepticism in the value of their formal experiences, often labeling them as "fun" but lacking in the substance required for translation to a professional setting. Moreover, underrepresented students identified substantive barriers to their participation, including a sense of marginalization regarding their place within formal leadership programs open to all students.

These findings provide leadership educators with empirical data that their efforts are, for the most part, succeeding, but much more progress is necessary for broadly supporting student leadership development. Program recruitment efforts, curriculum, pedagogy, and facilitation should be assessed for responsiveness to cultural diversity and their foundation of social justice and equity. The curriculum, specifically, should more deeply illustrate how experiences and learning within leadership programs can be more broadly applied outside of those programs. While positive data is much in evidence, more work is clearly necessary to improve student leadership development.

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