

Leadership learning during a pandemic: reflections in a time of crisis

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Abstract

Purpose – This qualitative study aims to provide insights and reflections of how the pandemic affected the identity and a sense of self of students, who completed undergraduate leadership learning academic program.

Design/methodology/approach – Interviews.

Findings – Findings of this study showed three major themes throughout the interviews. During the COVID-19 pandemic, participants identified experiences with self-reflection, building community and navigating issues of social justice.

Originality/value – These findings highlight how leadership learning enabled certain participants to navigate and seek to resolve these problems and how their leadership learning aided their own self-discovery.

Keywords Leadership learning, Reflections, Pandemic, COVID-19

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Leadership education's impact on students after completion of a leadership certificate has been previously explored through longitudinal studies concerning leadership learning outcomes post-graduation. However, how has the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted these outcomes? The shared experience of the pandemic presents an opportunity to investigate how the students apply their leadership education when faced with extraordinary circumstances post-graduation. In unparalleled times of uncertainty, how do graduates of a leadership education program apply their leadership learning to make sense of the unique challenges they face? The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped and informed the reflections and experiences of undergraduate alumni who participated in leadership learning coursework.

The alumni recruited for this study graduated from a large, research institution in the southeast United States of America and completed an academic certificate program in leadership studies shortly before or during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the timing of participants' graduation, the researchers seek to explore how students applied their leadership learning after graduation when confronted with an unprecedented global health crisis in addition to the expected challenges undergraduates typically face after their undergraduate studies. Leadership learning is defined as "changes in knowledge, skills, behavior, attitudes and values resulting from educational experiences, both co-curricular and curricular in nature, associated with the activity of leadership" (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018, p. 57). In their post-graduate experiences that coincided with the pandemic, the participants highlighted three common categories that included self-reflection,

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community building and issues of social justice. In this paper, these themes that emerged from participants' reflections will be explored, and ways in which leadership educators can contextualize leadership concepts as experienced by learners throughout the COVID-19 pandemic will be discussed.

Review of the literature

The growth of undergraduate curricular leadership programs in higher education highlights the significant role of leadership learning across disciplines in undergraduate education. The evolution of leadership education is still supported by higher education's aim to produce future leaders equipped with a working knowledge of leadership concepts (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Furthermore, leadership education is positioned alongside student success at institutions with outcomes centered on civic involvement and job readiness (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2011; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Components of students' success considered in this study include academic achievement, participation in activities with a learning objective, satisfaction, acquiring desired knowledge, skills, competencies, perseverance and achieving educational goals (Kuh *et al.*, 2011). Students' achievement can be defined by preparing them to engage critically with complex social issues and take part in a democratic society (Beatty, Wiborg, & Brewster, 2021a, Beatty, Wiborg, & Brewster, LeBlanc, 2021b). Students' achievement should encompass not only academic success but also the development of critical thinking skills, an understanding of complex social issues and the ability to participate effectively in the world around them. This review of the literature highlights how leadership learning program outcomes are key components in addressing how to manage change and transitions as part of the leadership process.

Leadership learning outcomes

Researchers developed a set of 60 student leadership competencies based upon the outcomes of academic leadership programs at recognized universities (Seemiller, 2013). An individual's contributions and/or participation in a role or task are aided by these leadership competencies. Four dimensions are used to classify the competencies: knowledge, value, ability (motivation or skill) and behavior (Seemiller, 2016). These competencies highlight the relevance of leadership learning across several academic disciplines. The essence of interdisciplinary and integrative leadership learning, according to Wagner and Cilente (2011), goes beyond "just a command of facts" (p. 383) to create knowledge for problem-solving and managing change and transitions in organizations. Outcomes of leadership education, thus, extend beyond undergraduate studies. Student alumni's use of leadership language and the application of leadership expertise to daily experiences were discovered by Mitchell and Daugherty (2019). Furthermore, student graduates reported job advancement and greater marketability as a result of using their leadership knowledge and abilities throughout their professions (Mitchell & Daugherty, 2019). Beatty *et al.* (2021b), similar to White and Guthrie (2016), found that reflection is an important part of developing self-awareness for undergraduate leadership learners. Beatty *et al.* (2021b) challenged leadership educators to keep prioritizing the process of reflection in curriculum for leadership education. Incorporating purposeful personal reflection and learning about how reflection affects success and engagement in the leadership process was helpful to alumni of leadership education programs (Beatty *et al.*, 2021b). Beatty *et al.* (2021b) also emphasized the critical need for continuing to provide students with relevant course material that applies to their post-college experiences and explicitly connects leadership education to their personal and professional life when managing change and transitions. Leadership curriculum that demonstrates real-world applicability therefore, enables students to engage in the leadership process and understand the process of change and transitions.

Managing change and transitions

The COVID-19 pandemic led to a change and transition for those affected by the global crisis. Scholarship on leaders managing change and transitions was highlighted in framework presented by William Bridges in the early 1970s, to aid people and organizations in successfully managing change. Separating change from the accompanying transition is a fundamental tenet of the managing transitions framework (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). Theoretically, situations like starting a new career, relocating, going to school or transitioning through a global pandemic are all examples of external, event-based changes that are situational in nature. The transition period includes an individual's reaction to change, regardless of how it occurs. Change can be forced upon us or something we choose. To put it another way, the transition is the mental or emotional process we go through to accept change and helps us reorient ourselves (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). Therefore, any outward change a person experiences must be followed by an internal transition process, according to the managing transitions framework. When emotions experienced during the change process are reflected upon and made sense of, there is a greater chance that changes will not intensify or cause unpleasant emotions such as tension, loneliness and hopelessness (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). Undergraduate students engaging in leadership learning must have real-world applications that consider how change and transitions impact how one engages in the leadership process.

Conceptual framework and research questions

The conceptual framework for this study is informed by Guthrie and Jenkins's (2018) definition of leadership learning and Kuh and colleagues' (2007) guiding framework on student success, which provides a more in-depth and nuanced path of factors that contribute to student success. Kuh and colleagues (2007) identified that the definition of student success includes grades, graduation and student learning gains, with the following post-college outcomes: employment, graduate or professional school and a practice of lifelong learning. For the conceptual framework for this study, we propose that student success includes leadership learning gains post-graduation (Beatty *et al.*, 2021b). Finally, we argue that leadership learning influences post-college outcomes and experiences within an individual's career, life and community (Beatty *et al.*, 2021b). This study also explores the ways in which leadership learning in higher education contributes to student reactions to the pandemic. We believe this study can provide insights into the reactions of leadership students during a time of global crisis and shed light on ways in which undergraduate students apply their leadership learning to make sense of times of hardship. We specify in our conceptual framework, when considering Bridges and Bridges (2016) managing transitions that students' success includes leadership learning influencing career, life and community post-college outcomes (see Figure 1 adopted from Beatty *et al.*, 2021b).

Using this framework as a basis, this study seeks to explore the following research question:

How do alumni of an undergraduate leadership certificate program describe their leadership learning application during a global pandemic?

Methods and case overview

This study employed a qualitative, case study design. To answer the research question in this study, we focus on both, and define case study methodology as a "...qualitative approach in which the investigator explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information and reports a case description and case themes" (Creswell &

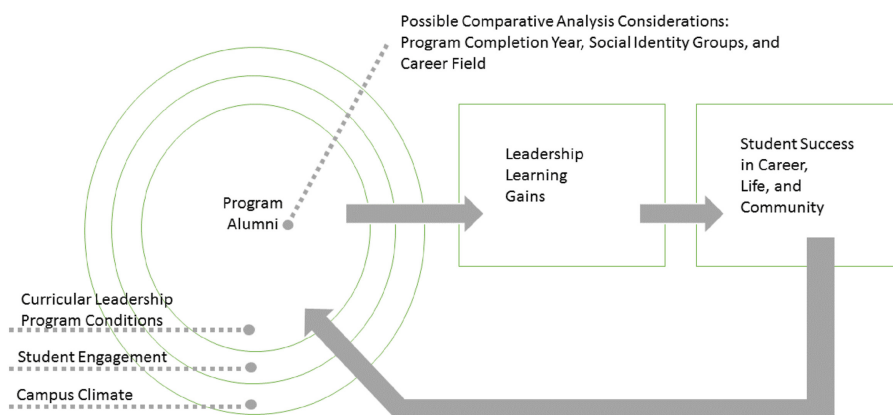


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of leadership learning for students' success adopted from *Beatty et al. (2021b)*

Poth, 2018, p. 96). The long-term research project this study stems from utilizes the case study approach with this being an ongoing study within a particular program and a specific curriculum that students experienced. From a philosophical lens, the research process should reveal multiple, contradictory or complex findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). The larger research project is descriptive in nature from a constructivist lens, which assumes that realities are co-constructed through lived experiences and interactions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Therefore, we utilized an exploratory, descriptive approach in the identification of leadership learning gained and/or attributed to collegiate experiences of students who completed a leadership certificate program. The study explores the experiences of nine alumni of the same leadership certificate program who were interviewed in the summer of 2021. The leadership certificate program these students participated in consists of an 18-credit interdisciplinary course sequence. The certificate is open to all undergraduate students at the university for enrollment. As of 2022, there have been over 250 students who have graduated from the certificate program since its start in 2008. This study contributes a fifth round of data collection to a larger alumni research program study that has to-date interviewed a total of 67 participants. The overall alumni research program study has been granted IRB approval.

Data collection

Participants for the fifth round of data collection for the alumni research project study were recruited through electronic mail and social media posts and invitations through the platform LinkedIn. Through the recruitment efforts, nine participants were found who volunteered to be interviewed for this round of data collection. All participants selected for the study graduated from the leadership certificate program between the years of 2019 and 2021. Focus was given on interviewing participants who graduated from the certificate program during the pandemic. Course syllabi and program outcomes were used for content analysis to develop intentional interview questions that explored the key learning outcomes for the undergraduate leadership certificate program. Data collection were comprised primarily of in-depth interviews utilizing an interview guide to focus the conversation on topics related to the study (Johnson & Christensen, 2016). Interviews were 45–60 minutes in length and audio-recorded for transcription. Transcribed copies of interviews were provided to participants for member-checking and were reformatted utilizing pseudonyms.

Data analysis

Data analysis began in the fall of 2021 on the data collected from the nine participants interviewed in the summer of 2021. Throughout the process, the research team engaged in reflexivity memoing, noting their own positionality and possible biases (Johnson & Christensen, 2016). To deepen understanding, a cross-case analysis approach grounds this plan (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Rossman and Rallis (2012) described the benefits of using cross-case analysis and stated, “these analyses respect the integrity of each case and then seek commonalities across cases, as well as differences” (p. 103). The research team used Nvivo to track codes and note patterns in participant responses in order to establish trustworthiness. In the exploration phase of data analysis, all nine cases were reviewed by the research team and an interim case summary was created per case. These summaries were brief, noting a general synthesis of the case and quality of data. Additionally, the researchers reviewed the cases for patterns concerning shared experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic using two targeted questions within the larger interview. The first question was “what challenges has the pandemic posed for alumni of the undergraduate leadership certificate in their school/work/personal life?” The second question asked how have they “approached these challenges and navigated them and in what ways have they applied their leadership learning?” A list of commonly mentioned experiences was collected and the shared findings were separated for further analysis for themes.

Participants

The nine participants all self-identified their demographic breakdown for the study. Participants consisted of seven participants who self-identified as White, one participant who identified as Black and one participant who identified as Hispanic/Latinx. The gender breakdown included seven women, one man and one nonbinary participant. Of the nine participants, two identified as being first-generation students and two openly identified as Jewish. The nine participants selected the pseudonym names of Alexis, Amy, Rebecca, Kelly, Jessica, Garnet, Stephanie, Zack and Christina. All participants graduated from the institution with their bachelor’s degrees at the time of the interviews.

Findings

While reflecting on their leadership learning experiences, participants highlighted areas of leadership learning that impacted their response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, compared to past interviews within the project, the pandemic demonstrably challenged interviewees to examine their identities in ways that the academic leadership program could not because of the unprecedented nature of the pandemic. Previous studies showed how academic leadership courses can cultivate reflection, relationships and application to current experiences, but the pandemic made these elements more concrete in participants’ lives and showcased additional issues beyond course experiences (Beatty *et al.*, 2021a, b). Through data analysis, three key learning outcomes emerged from this case study. Participants showcased meaningful experiences with self-reflection, building community and facing issues of social justice. The themes both individually and together show how alumni of the undergraduate leadership certificate program were able to connect leadership learning outcomes to their understanding of themselves and the wider world during the global crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Experiences with self-reflection

Experiences participants shared concerning self-reflection spanned a wide range, from some participants expressing having more time to reflect during the lockdowns and other participants sharing that they had no time to reflect due to experiencing rapid change within a short time span. For participants who used the lockdown as a time to reflect on their own

lives, some of them, such as Stephanie, reflected that the pandemic forced them to face various traumas that had been previously suppressed. When plans made during their senior year to live abroad fell through due to the pandemic and they no longer had a set routine, they were:

...forced to have to sit there in the same space, and just sit there in essentially silence. That's when everything kind of just like came up...trying to do a first-year grad school remotely, and the pandemic while trying to navigate so much that was brought to the forefront was absolutely difficult. And I became a person for months that I did not recognize.

Stephanie's reflection illustrates the experience of being suddenly forced to focus on their own identity and who they were as a person beyond their identity as a student. When plans made before the pandemic fell through, there was a sense of crisis within Stephanie, prompting them to change their future plans and re-adjust to something different. They had to reflect on their own identity in order to re-gain their sense of self.

Another participant, Amy, performed self-reflection in a different way. Instead of self-reflecting on how they can change themselves, they noticed other people focused on who they were before the pandemic and how to get back to that person. There was a sense of idealized self that Amy saw people building up in their heads and a fixation on "what could have been." Amy reflected:

People have become hyper focused on their life before, and seeking out the experiences that we perceived ourselves. To have what we have now that we plan to have or the things that we wanted to do. And that hyper fixation on the what could have been, the what was, the what it should be, was only really exacerbated by something that was unprecedented because the reality of the situation and the way I wrestled with this is that no matter what the time was, we can't predict the future, like everything, nothing that you were anticipating was really going to play out the way it was. But just because something so big happens, and such a universally shared experience happens and then, on a scale that affects so many different things, people's health, people's financial stabilities, all these different, you know, aspects.

Although Amy was able to recognize within themselves that they were not able to predict the future, and that this idealized future may not have ever come to fruition even if the pandemic had not occurred, they were able to see that others were not able to reach the same level of understanding. Amy utilized self-reflection as a tool to better understand reality and to process the uncertainty of the future despite even the best laid plans.

Several of the participants shared that the pandemic gave them time for self-reflection, but this was not the case for all of the participants. Christina shared that the number of significant life milestones they experienced made them feel as though, "there was no time to like, reflect or process them." With the speed at which things were changing concerning the pandemic, graduation and moving on to the next stage in their lives, some participants were not able to reflect as much as others during this time. Instead, they focused on addressing the myriad changes they were facing in their lives.

Experiences building community

With lockdowns that took place during the spring and summer of 2020, many of the study participants faced difficulties building community as they graduated from university and relocated to new locations. Several interviewees had gone home for spring break in the spring of 2020, but as the pandemic persisted, then found themselves being forced to stay home while completing their classes online. Some began their post-college job search process while also being aware that many people were losing their jobs due to the lockdowns. A common theme the interviewees mentioned was a feeling of isolation from friends, family, classmates and communities. For interviewees who had roommates, there was a new adjustment to how to live with those roommates. Alexis was one participant who struggled with having decisions within their shared living space being collective and trying to find a compromise

between a roommate who had anxiety about contracting COVID-19, and a roommate who was feeling trapped and lonely by not being able to go out and socialize. Another participant Kelly had a roommate who was practicing full isolation because of the pandemic, and that led to difficult dynamics in the household as Kelly and the third roommate both had to work as servers in order to support themselves financially.

Because the pandemic occurred while many of the study participants were in the process of graduating and making plans for their next stages of life, moving to a new location was often experienced as isolating. Interviewee Garnet got a job across the country after graduation, but had only worked remotely so far at the time of the interview. They shared that they are not as aware of the community they are now in and are instead "...very isolated from everything that allows the narrative to be shaped before I hear about it since I'm not there to see it for myself." Garnet might be a part of a new professional community, but because they were working at home instead of at the office, they noted a sense of disconnect from their new workplace. They did not feel as connected to the work-place culture and the team decisions being made.

For those witnessing the difficulty in finding jobs during mid-2020, some considered postponing their job search and applying for graduate programs instead, but not all of those who mentioned graduate school ended up following through. Interviewee Zack ended up enrolling in a master's program and noted feelings of isolation not only from not having roommates due to pandemic complications but also struggling to find free time to meet with friends. With the more rigorous graduate schedule, and no longer having as much freedom to meet with friends with pandemic restrictions, Zack had to intentionally schedule FaceTime calls with their close friend after that friend moved away. Zack shared:

But overall, again, I think that is been probably the number one challenge because of the pandemic is just this feeling of isolation, loneliness, and then obviously, with school being more stressful and not necessarily in an easily accessible outlet, to sort of just be, you know, release the stress and not feel lonely by hanging with friends and, you know, maybe going to a restaurant and bar and things like that. Some of those things that we've become accustomed to we are sort of obviously restricted.

Stephanie discussed how while some of their friends chose to take a gap year between their undergraduate degrees and graduate school, they felt that they could not do the same because of the pandemic and their mentality as first-generation college students. They shared that they felt they had to follow a rigid path forward that was different from their friends because they did not have the same resources that would allow them to take a break. This difference in resources also led to a sense of disconnect for Stephanie from their friends who were able to afford to take a gap year.

While some participants talked about feelings of isolation, Kelly mentioned being able to spend more time with family that they do not often get the chance to see. Kelly was able to go home during spring and summer 2020 which was something they had not been able to do in a long time since they were enrolled as a full-time undergraduate student at a school far from their hometown. They were able to bond more with their family members and were able to get to know the younger generation who had been born while Kelly had been in school. The pandemic brought them closer together with their family in a way that they would not have experienced without the lockdowns.

Experiences with issues of social justice

For several of the participants, the pandemic and resulting lockdowns highlighted the reality of injustice experienced by so many they had not fully understood during the lessons shared within the leadership certificate program. Some of these injustices included classism, homelessness and racism. While some of the participants were aware of the existence of these issues, they had not fully processed the impact of these injustices on society. One participant, Christina, noticed how

living situations had gotten worse for those who are homeless in Washington D.C. compared to 2019 when they lived there during an internship. Christina shared:

(The city was helping to provide for a lot of the homeless and giving them a shelter and resources. But I think recently that was cut off, because in the last four months, it's gotten worse. So you know, homelessness and homicides and just gang activity, and those sorts of things have rapidly increased by what I can tell in my own community.

Due to these increases of problems within the community that Christina was living in, they made a comment that while they had liked that area during their internship, they would be moving soon to an area that was safer. Christina mentioned the concepts of privilege, and recognized that the freedom they possessed to move to a new area represented a class privilege they possessed that other members of her community may not. Another participant, Rebecca, also recognized examples of classism that they were previously not aware of due to the pandemic. While they did not give any specific examples, they shared that it was an eye-opening experience and that they had not been cognizant of classism before the pandemic.

One of the participants, Jessica, noticed how the pandemic increased tensions between government, parents and teachers, as school policies were a source of conflict across communities. Teachers especially were caught in the middle, having to navigate local municipal decisions that sometimes conflicted with state government mandates. The unfair treatment of Asian Americans as shown on the news also showed Jessica how "...people are trying to blame the pandemic, on someone or on something. And I feel like they're finding different people to blame it on. They'll blame the president, they'll blame their state legislature, they'll blame a group of people." Jessica reflected upon how the blame that people looked to place disproportionately impacted minority populations, as they witnessed some members of the public treating Asian Americans as if they were the cause of the pandemic.

Amy also reflected on her observation of the collective social justice awakening that emerged during the pandemic:

Because people who were very comfortable in their jobs, maybe, you know, experiencing unemployment or homelessness or whatever. And those are things that they didn't have to think about before. And now they're left wondering, well, these situations kind of existed beforehand, why wasn't I doing anything proactive to help those communities beforehand? So those realities are just becoming more real to people.

This increase in social activism was evidenced in the Black Lives Matter movement that gained increased national attention and participation during the summer of 2020. Participant Alexis reflected on the Black Lives Matter marches and the tension people experienced in deciding to risk exposure to COVID-19 through their participation in marches:

I think COVID-19 offered like a lot of the quarantine and just isolation offered a lot of time to hear people's stories. I think that was a big thing that moved me was I had like, I was on social media all day. And like, I was listening to people's stories and learning a lot, because I had the time to hear. And so I think, at least for myself, like it impacted my ability to engage with social injustices.

Many of the findings concerning self-reflection, building community and experiences with issues of social justice have interweaving ties. For example, it was the self-reflections of people within marginalized communities that led to the Black Lives Matter marches. The graduates of the leadership certificate program were aware of these ties and were able to reflect on their own identities within themselves and their communities during a time of crisis. They saw both internal and external conflict as they had to deal with their own experiences of isolation and the experiences of isolation of others.

In summary, the meaningful experiences with self-reflection, building community and facing issues of social justice connected with the study's primary research question

investigating how leadership certificate alumni applied leadership learning during a global pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic offered a prime opportunity to observe how leadership learning influenced alumni experiences when handling a crisis. The findings of dealing with self-reflection, building community and facing issues of social justice were found within most interviewee responses with varying levels of targeted focus during the interviews. These patterns within the findings have the potential to influence how leadership learning is presented moving forward out of a post-pandemic world.

Discussion

Because of the unprecedented nature of the pandemic, participants within the fifth data collection round were challenged to explore their identities in new ways during this project's interviews than during previous rounds of data collection. Academic leadership courses have been shown to foster introspection, relationships and application to current situations; however, the pandemic highlighted additional difficulties that are not covered by classroom experiences (Beatty *et al.*, 2021a, b). Our findings demonstrate that some graduates of the academic leadership program had difficulty reflecting on their own identities and positions, while others had more time to do so and became aware of the racial and class disparities that the pandemic had uncovered. During lockdowns, participants also had a hard time forming bonds with other people and engaging in meaningful interpersonal relationships.

Many of the struggles participants experienced with the changes caused by the pandemic and lockdowns are explained by the endings and neutral zone phases of Bridge's transition model (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). Amy's statement on how people were focused on what could have happened instead of what did happen exemplifies how people were struggling to let go and accept their new reality. They resisted letting go of their set expectations and another example of the transition model in action is illustrated through Alexis' and Kelly' challenges with their roommates (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). While some of the roommates were able to accept that change had to happen, other roommates were in conflict on how to enact that change. Both Alexis and Kelly had to find solutions with roommates who were in different stages of the transition model, while also navigating their own location within the stages (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). Additionally, some participants such as Garnet were stuck in the neutral zone during the pandemic, as lockdowns and remote work in a new city prevented them from moving to the new beginnings stage (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). Without the opportunity to experience a new beginning, participants were not able to feel the new energy and sense of purpose that comes with a beginning a new stage in life, and some were left to flounder in semi-isolation (Bridges & Bridges, 2016). These findings highlight how leadership learning enabled certain participants to navigate and seek to resolve these problems, and how their leadership learning aided their own self-discovery. For example, Stephanie's unexpected free time during the lockdown led to self-reflection, a practice encouraged within leadership education. Stephanie's self-discovery also increased their awareness of financial differences between themselves and peers when it came to being able to afford a gap year or not. This acceptance of the differences in circumstances was an opportunity for learning and growth. Simultaneously, Christina's lack of time for self-reflection, but growing awareness of social issues such as homelessness in their community, showed how even without the time for reflection, a greater awareness of societal shortcomings when applied to social justice issues can still occur when students are equipped with the leadership concepts and frameworks to identify and make sense of them.

Limitations

When looking at the limitations of the study, it is important to recognize that most participants who responded to the call for volunteers were White and women which restricts

the generalizability of the findings. Because the data collection for this study was a fifth round of an existing longitudinal study, changes made to the interview guide to reference the pandemic were minimal in an effort to maintain consistency. Including additional pandemic-specific questions could have potentially surfaced further information concerning impacts of the pandemic on the participants. With the study conducted through a single interview for each participant in 2021, participant views were captured at that one specific moment in time. These views could have changed or adjusted if there had been multiple interviews over a period of time.

Implications

The COVID-19 pandemic provided alumni of leadership learning undergraduate programs unexpected opportunities to investigate their own sense-making using the resources and tools learned in courses for the leadership certificate program. [Steele, Pierre, and Priest \(2021\)](#) pointed out that there are no clear answers when considering how leadership education needs to transform post pandemic, but they did offer key considerations. [Steele et al. \(2021\)](#) encouraged leadership educators to investigate the ideas and issues of managing transitions and change during the COVID-19 pandemic and to embrace the complexity and open up adaptive space for students to engage in inquiry around leadership, change and managing transitions. Participants in this study were able to contextualize leadership learning concepts in a real-world emergency environment by reflecting on their experiences during the pandemic through a leadership education lens. This suggests new implications for how leadership educators can develop their curriculum to leverage the lived experiences students experienced during the pandemic. Specifically, leadership educators can more effectively target course and programming objectives to match challenges encountered during a global crisis by doing research on this real-world application of leadership learning outcomes during the pandemic. By directly including examples of the pandemic's influence within course lessons on the leadership theory, instructors will be able to provide more concrete experiences for students. Leadership learning can appear abstract to some students and providing specific examples that relate to personal experiences help bridge that gap between tangential and real. With some of the difficulties faced by subjects concerning reflection, leadership educators can adjust lessons on reflection to focus on specific methods students can use to better reflect on what is occurring in their lives with appropriate practice activities.

Participants in the research concluded that while their leadership learning provided a foundation to build upon, their experiences of the pandemic challenged them to seriously consider what it meant to exercise leadership in a time of crisis. In the future, leadership educators can evaluate opportunities to solicit students' pandemic experiences and help learners make connections between their experiences and the leadership learning theories in their courses and programming. The pandemic gave experiential learning opportunities to leadership certificate alumni and if that experiential learning can be brought into the classroom, then there is more opportunity for long term impactful learning of leadership concepts. Some potential ways this could be implemented includes learning simulations, volunteer work or gamification techniques.

Future research opportunities could include following up with these participants to see how the pandemic impacted their future paths and outlooks over a long period of time. Additional researchers may want to investigate the effects of living through a pandemic and how views of leadership concepts have changed over time after the crisis of the pandemic has lessened. If there is a change, is this change something short-term or permanent? While there have been many articles published during the past few years concerning the pandemic, the long-term impact it has on leadership learning is something that has not been fully investigated and will likely take a few more years before a long-term investigation can be performed concerning

these issues. Research comparing leadership students' responses to graduates without leadership might also be a future research project to be considered. Understanding how the pandemic created an environment in which people were forced to confront change in ways that they might not have without such a chaotic catalyst and the role leadership learning played in shaping how alumni adapted to dramatic changes could be a comparison study with alumni who did not complete the undergraduate leadership certificate.

Conclusion

Undergraduate alumni were able to apply their learning gained through a leadership certificate program to explore their own meaning making based on tools, frameworks and concepts acquired through their participation in program courses. Through reflection of their experiences during the pandemic through a leadership education lens, study participants were able to contextualize leadership learning tools to reflect on, make sense of and respond to challenges faced in an unprecedented, real-world emergency context. From this research, leadership educators can conclude that by better targeting course and programming objectives to match obstacles undergraduate learners may experience during times of crisis, they can better prepare their students to navigate the hardships they may face post-graduation. The analysis of research participants reflections suggests that while leadership learning can provide students a foundation to build upon, encountering the pandemic gave learners an opportunity to use that foundation to reflect on what it means to practice leadership in a time of crisis. Moving forward, leadership educators can leverage participants' diverse pandemic experiences as a way to make connections with leadership learning concepts and exemplify real-life applications of leadership learning theories within courses and programming.

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