

Military college alumni perspectives: attributes of on-campus leadership development

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aimed to explore alumni's perspectives on which attributes of their military college experience were most valued for their leadership development and which attributes may have been missing from their on-campus experience.

Design/methodology/approach – We conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 military college alumni to explore their perspectives on the most valuable on-campus attributes associated with their leadership development and the missing attributes that would presently benefit their leadership practice in the workplace.

Findings – Alumni valued the following attributes connected to their leadership development at the military college: positional leadership roles, conflict and challenges, mentor relationships and the general rigors of their military college experience. Further, alumni believed they would have benefitted from increased diversity, improved mentorship and more exposure to a differing leadership approach. This different approach included a more relational form of leadership and leading with more ambiguity.

Originality/value – A growing body of research has examined the attributes associated with leadership learning on traditional college campuses; however, less is known about leadership learning in collegiate military environments.

Keywords Leadership, Military college, Service academy, Leadership learning, Leadership development

Paper type Research paper

Senior military colleges and federal service academies in the United States of America share the mission of educating future military officers and emphasize leadership learning within their curricular and co-curricular programs (Macris, 2023; Metcalf & Heller, 2022; Orlowsky *et al.*, 2023; Tate, 2021). These institutions function as a primary pathway for developing officers to serve in the armed forces, and therefore, leadership learning is critical to prepare students for the complex challenges they will soon face. Further, many graduates are quickly responsible for personnel and equipment worth millions of dollars (Tate, 2021). Yet, limited published research has examined the efficacy of leadership learning on these campuses, and almost no research has explored the perspective of alumni from these institutions. Significantly more is known about leadership learning on traditional college campuses (e.g. Beatty, Wiborg, Brewster, & LeBlanc, 2021; Dugan and Komives, 2010; Eich, 2008; Mitchell & Daugherty, 2019; Rosch, May, Wilson, & Spencer, 2023). We aimed to fill this gap by discovering the perspectives of military college alumni uniquely positioned to provide insights that might benefit administrators seeking to enhance leadership learning at military institutions.

For the purposes of this article, we used Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) frame of leadership learning, which consists of six aspects including (1) leadership knowledge, (2) intrapersonal

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leader development, (3) training for leadership competencies, (4) learning through reflecting on experience, (5) learning through reflecting on observation and (6) awareness of personal process for learning leadership. In this article, we use the term “leadership learning” to capture all six aspects, and we use the term “leadership development” to capture two specific aspects of leadership learning: intrapersonal leader development and training for leadership competencies. The purpose of this study was to explore alumni’s perspective on which attributes of their military college experience were most valued for their leadership development and which attributes may have been missing from their on-campus experience. To this end, we interviewed 15 recent alumni from a specific military college.

Conceptual framework

[Eich’s \(2008\)](#) grounded theory of high-quality leadership programs served as the conceptual framework for this study with its emphasis on programmatic attributes connected to student leadership development. While the participants in our study did not engage in a traditional closed program in isolation from other campus experiences, their cadet experience in college was programmatic in nature. For instance, each year at the institution, cadets progress through four tiers of staged learning connected to specific pillars of development. A campus committee meets regularly to map leadership competency development and learning outcomes with specific experiences across campus. Due to these programmatic features and [Eich’s \(2008\)](#) specific focus on undergraduate leadership development in co-curricular contexts, we believed the grounded theory of high-quality leadership programs was a good fit as an overall frame for our study. Further, this work is frequently referenced in the undergraduate leadership learning literature (e.g. [Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018](#); [Lunsford & Brown, 2017](#); [Rosch et al., 2023](#); [Rosch & Headrick, 2020](#)).

Interviewing 62 stakeholders from four undergraduate leadership programs that met specific, high-quality criteria, [Eich \(2008\)](#) identified 16 program attributes important to student leadership development. The attributes were organized across three clusters including participants engaged in building and sustaining a learning community, student-centered experiential learning and research-grounded continuous program improvement. This framework influenced the design of our research questions, interview protocol and overall approach to our study.

Literature review

This literature review examines research on attributes associated with leadership learning on traditional college campuses and also highlights connections to [Eich’s \(2008\)](#) attributes of high-quality leadership programs. The concluding section explores attributes on collegiate military campuses that contribute to leadership learning.

Practicing leadership experientially

Practicing leadership and being challenged through experience is important for undergraduate leadership learning ([Egan, McBrayer, Wells, & Tolman, 2021](#); [Foreman & Retallick, 2013, 2016](#); [Greenleaf, Klaus, & Arensdorf, 2017](#); [Kim, 2022](#); [Mak & Kim, 2017](#); [Mitchell & Daugherty, 2019](#)). This experiential element is delivered through a variety of mechanisms on college campuses including programmatic experiences, internships, competitions, service, participation in co-curricular activities and holding student leadership positions. Participants in three separate leadership program evaluations demonstrated the importance of experience ([Egan et al., 2021](#); [Greenleaf et al., 2017](#); [Mitchell & Daugherty, 2019](#)). First, an exit focus group from an undergraduate leadership program indicated students appreciated the real-world, practical experiences that were delivered as a part of the curriculum through internships and undergraduate research opportunities ([Greenleaf et al., 2017](#)). Students also described the importance of being drawn out of their comfort zone. Another program evaluation included

survey data from 103 alumni of a leadership minor who rated internships as one of the more important attributes of the program (Mitchell & Daugherty, 2019). Finally, in an evaluation of a co-curricular leadership program, alumni expressed the action-oriented requirements of the program were important to their leadership development (Egan *et al.*, 2021). These requirements included a service hour requirement, a service trip, a training retreat, a capstone service project and holding a student leadership position on campus.

Student leadership positions and engagement in student groups have been connected to undergraduates' leadership learning gains (Foreman & Retallick, 2013, 2016; Kim, 2022; Mak & Kim, 2017). Foreman and Retallick (2013, 2016) affirmed the positive outcomes associated with co-curricular involvement. Their survey of almost 1,000 seniors in an agriculture and life sciences college found that those who were members of clubs scored significantly higher on individual leadership values (combined scale of consciousness of self, congruence and commitment) and citizenship scale than non-members, and those who participated in more clubs (3–4 clubs) scored significantly higher than those in fewer clubs (0–2 clubs) for these same outcomes. Additionally, those who served as officers in clubs scored significantly higher on the consciousness of self, commitment, and citizenship scales. Using similar outcome measures, Kim (2022) surveyed 700 undergraduate students and found those participating in clubs scored relatively higher in the individual, group and community leadership values than non-participants. Finally, another study revealed that student organization officers scored significantly higher than non-officers in management of feelings, management of meaning and management of risk among the 900 college students surveyed (Mak & Kim, 2017).

The studies reviewed across this subsection are in alignment with many of the leadership program attributes found in Eich's (2008) study on high-quality leadership programs. For instance, the second cluster, student-centered experiential learning experiences, includes the following related program attributes: leadership practice, application in meetings, civic service and discovery retreats. The leadership practice attribute involved community or campus projects, taking on positional roles and involvement on campus or in the community. In summary, the attribute of practicing leadership through experience is important for undergraduate leadership learning.

Mentorship

Having a mentor on campus can be important for undergraduate leadership learning, though more understanding is needed on effective implementation (Campbell, Smith, Dugan, & Komives, 2012; Greenleaf *et al.*, 2017). Sunderman and Orsini (2023) captured this reality, stating, "The presence of mentoring relationship or programs does not guarantee their effectiveness" (p. 40). A study using a sample of 36,197 college students from the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership indicated mentor relationships with a student-affairs professional, faculty member or employer positively impacted leadership capacity (Campbell *et al.*, 2012). However, not all students may experience the same benefits from mentoring depending on implementation related to the success of the mentor relationship. For instance, Greenleaf *et al.* (2017) found that mentor and mentee evaluations from an undergraduate leadership program indicated that half of these matches were successful, while the remaining evaluations suggested improvements could be made. Finally, one of Eich's (2008) 16 attributes of high-quality leadership programs included educators modeling leadership through either mentoring or providing support.

Experiencing diversity and differing viewpoints

Engaging with peers from diverse backgrounds or different viewpoints has emerged as an important attribute of undergraduate leadership learning (Beatty *et al.*, 2021; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Eich, 2008; Rosch *et al.*, 2023). A study involving over 14,000 undergraduate seniors found that having socio-cultural conversations with peers across a wide range of difference (e.g. multi-cultural, values, political and societal concerns) contributed to gains in the leadership development outcomes measured (Dugan & Komives, 2010). Discussing these

findings, the researchers urged the following: “The importance of peer conversations about difference cannot be understated and educators are encouraged to actively structure and foster such opportunities through leadership curriculum and co-curriculum” (Dugan & Komives, 2010, p. 539). In another example, Rosch *et al.* (2023) interviewed 25 alumni from a public university and found many participants described benefiting from working with others who had personal differences or working with a diverse group of peers. Similarly, interviews with 20 alumni of an undergraduate leadership certificate program demonstrated participants’ appreciation of having to collaborate and build relationships across differences (Beatty *et al.*, 2021). Finally, having diverse and engaged students emerged as Eich’s (2008) first attribute of high-quality leadership programs.

Attributes in collegiate military environments

Collegiate military environments include six USA senior military colleges, five USA Federal Service Academies and the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps (ROTC) found on many college campuses across the United States of America. Limited research has explored how attributes on these campuses contribute to undergraduate leadership learning, though several recent conceptual articles explored how individual service academies systematically approach leadership development on their campuses (Macris, 2023; Metcalf & Heller, 2022; Orlowsky *et al.*, 2023; Tate, 2021). A review of these articles indicated collegiate military environments emphasized leadership and character development alongside a culture of service, rigor, honor, integrity and respect. Many of these institutions have leadership development models or approaches that scaffold the growth of cadets or midshipmen while enrolled. These models often include the following elements: stated core values, character development involving an honor code, academic progress, military progress, physical progress, formal leadership coursework and an integration of development theories.

Some research has explored the connections between attributes on these campuses and leadership learning (Dunn, Ho, Odom, & Perdue, 2016; Fischer, 2015; Lester, Hannah, Harms, Vogelgesang, & Avolio, 2011). A study involving field observations of physical training (PT) and interviews with 20 cadets and 5 cadre (students with positional authority facilitating PT) demonstrated that this experience created a positive, motivating environment that fostered leadership development (Fischer, 2015). The following themes that fostered this positive leadership development environment emerged: expectation to lead by example, camaraderie through physical challenge and a reliance on mutual support among peers. Another study indicated that cadets who were engaged in a formal academic leadership program held a more systems-thinking, relational approach to leadership as compared to those cadets not participating in this type of academic program (Dunn *et al.*, 2016). Lester *et al.* (2011) found that cadets in a rigorous, reflective, leadership-development-focused mentor program saw more increases of leadership efficacy than cadets in a traditional co-curricular leadership program.

Each of the studies reviewed thus far involved cadets on campus and only one study could be identified that explored military college alumni’s perspectives on their prior leadership learning (Husted & West, 2008). This study surveyed 53 military college alumni with senior-level experiences in the business field. These alumni believed the honor code made them more successful leaders and was more critical to their success than graduate degrees, serving in the military or other leadership experiences in their corporate environments. Due to the lack of leadership learning research including alumni of military college environments, further exploration of their experiences is warranted.

Methodology

Summary of research design

This study employed basic qualitative research (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We conducted one-hour semi-structured interviews with 15 recent alumni from the same senior military college in

the United States of America. Data analysis was guided by Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral, which included organizing data, memo emerging themes, classifying codes into themes and displaying data. Our methodological approach was designed to address the following research questions: (1) What attributes of the military college experience have the most perceived leadership development value for alumni? (2) What attributes do alumni perceive were missing from their military college experience that would benefit their current leadership effectiveness?

Sampling and recruitment

Prior to recruitment, we obtained institutional review board approval to move forward with this study. Through criterion sampling, we chose prospective participants who graduated from the same military college within the past four years and held significant student leadership positions while on campus. The positions in our criteria specifically included cadet company, battalion and regimental command; varsity sport team captain or president of a student club. These criteria identified 450 military college alumni who met our criteria for recruitment. Per institutional registrar demographic data, this sub-population included 382 men, 68 women, 300 White, 32 African American and 10 Asian. This demographic distribution is similar to the entire cadet population at the college. We sent an initial recruitment email to this sub-population describing the purpose of the study, the incentive and to inform them of a follow-up screening survey. The incentive offered included a notebook and mug from the leadership center on campus. The screening survey was used to confirm eligibility, collect self-identified demographic information and gauge interest in participating in an interview. In selecting participants for interviews from the screening, we utilized additional criteria to ensure diversity in our sample to include gender, ethnicity and occupation. First, we selected every eligible female and minority alumni who completed the screening. Our selections then focused on balancing current occupations among military, government and private sectors.

Participants

The 15 participants included alumni from the same military college who graduated between 2018 and 2022 and ranged in age from 23 to 27. We deliberately collected additional demographic information through open-ended questions permitting participants to self-describe their identifiers, and we rely on this information when using pronouns in the findings. The participants included eleven men and four women. The participants further identified in the following ways: nine identified as White, two as Caucasian, two as African American, one as Hispanic/Latino/White and one as White/Hispanic. While enrolled at the military college, the participants held multiple student leadership positions and were highly engaged on campus. Finally, the participants were employed in the following sectors: five in the USA Military, five in corporate settings, four in the USA Government and one in graduate school.

Military college structured experience. The participants in this study experienced a unique military-style college education emphasizing leadership and character development. Students lived on campus all four years in a highly structured lifestyle framed around a formal leadership development program. Across four years of intentionally designed tiered development, the program focused on four growth areas: character, academics, military and fitness. Campus life included a 24-h schedule, morning formations, early morning physical training, attending classes, military uniforms worn to a highly regulated standard and an honor code deeply entrenched in the culture. After graduating, around one-third of the cadets commission as officers in the USA military, while the remaining pursue a variety of careers similar to those graduating from a traditional college.

Data collection

While scheduling interviews via email, we asked participants to reflect on how their experiences at the military college contributed to their leadership development. All participants

completed an informed consent for their interviews, which were recorded through Zoom or a recording device in cases when participants lived near the researchers. We engaged participants in a one-hour, semi-structured interview using an interview protocol as a guide.

Data analysis

Per Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral, we began by managing our data in a shared digital folder. All three researchers typed field notes in a common template immediately following each interview, and these were stored alongside recorded audio files. A transcription service transcribed the recordings, and we generated random pseudonyms to obscure the identity of each participant. Before employing assessment software, we co-trained on our coding approach using the comments feature in Microsoft Word on two transcripts while engaging in dialog to ensure a consistent technique. We then used MAXQDA for coding and theme development.

During first-cycle coding, we utilized open coding and structural coding (Saldaña, 2021). Our structural codes mainly organized data around responses focused on either attributes alumni valued most for their leadership development or attributes alumni perceived to be missing from their experience. While open coding, we wrote a description of each code created to include boundaries for exclusion and inclusion, which resulted in a clear codebook for reference while coding. We held regular meetings to discuss the development of our codes and wrote memos throughout the process in MAXQDA to reflect on code formation. In our second coding cycle, we applied pattern coding to group codes into larger meta-codes (Saldaña, 2021). This was accomplished through MAXQDA's maps feature, which permits the combination and connection of codes in a whiteboard-type space. The emerging themes were discussed further, and a theme description was written for each.

To enhance trustworthiness and credibility, we engaged in member checking by emailing participants portions of their interview connected to specific theme descriptions. This permitted participants to provide commentary and confirmation that we were interpreting their meaning correctly. Our final measures to increase trustworthiness included a rich description of the findings as well as reflexive reflections included in our interview field notes and memos.

Findings

RQ1. What attributes of the military college experience have the most perceived leadership development value for alumni?

Through probing alumni regarding their most valued leadership development experiences on campus, four attribute themes emerged across the data. Alumni valued their leadership positions held, experiencing real conflict and challenges, having a mentor relationship on campus and their general military college experience.

Leadership position

Some alumni highly valued holding a leadership position on campus and viewed this attribute as important to their leadership development. Most participants referenced positions within the rank structure of the cadets, but in some cases, participants also held positions related to student organizations or team sports. Charlie believed the attribute of holding a specific rank was the most important for his development because he felt responsible for the performance of others. "That was probably the best. Because then it's like I own this squad [...] their success is like a direct reflection of how you've led them and how you've cared for them as people." Lucas stated his rank position had the most leadership development value because it required interactions with others across campus. "I think the position and just the general situations that

I was put into, constantly interacting with regimental staff and battalion leaders, commandant and president.” These types of interactions had a significant impact on Darel as well:

...You’re interacting with more staff there at the school. And it just gives you a totally different perspective because you’re getting so many different inputs on situations, so many different experiences and backgrounds. For me, I would say I developed three times as much in my senior year than I did the first three years.

Here, Darel stated his leadership development accelerated rapidly after experiencing this higher-ranked position in his senior year.

In contrast, Viv appreciated the learning she acquired in a lower-level position that included more hands-on interaction with her peers. She stated,

I would say really the most leadership development was the kind of the hands-on leadership I got at really the lowest level, so being that squad leader type person and having to – at that level, it’s really a challenge to your leadership capabilities because you have to be able to influence others. . .

In a role she assumed later in her matriculation on campus, she experienced a position that enhanced her capacity for effective communication.

And then as the [specific position], I had a very unique opportunity to communicate to other people what the [Military College] was. And learning how to convey that to other people, because it’s a foreign concept to people who have never been there. . . I think really kind of brought a unique challenge to me. . .

Steve similarly expressed that his leadership position, which required external communication, had the most leadership development value for him. “It increased my leadership value because I had to learn how to – I was representing the corps, so I had to learn how to give interviews with different media reps [...] So, definitely knowing how to communicate the right way.”

Daniel agreed with other participants that his leadership position significantly impacted his development, and he highlighted the intensity or challenges of this role. “I mean, the most meaningful for me would be when I was the [specific position] because that was a really traumatic leadership learning year where I had to learn a lot of hard lessons from people [...]” This “traumatic leadership learning” Daniel experienced through his leadership position connects closely with another attribute theme that emerged from the data, real conflict and challenges.

Real conflict and challenges

Some alumni highly valued the attribute of navigating conflict, the messiness of working with others and managing difficult issues. After being asked which experiences had the most leadership development value for him, Lucas responded, “Having someone who I did not mesh well with as a supervisor, having a lot of subordinates, really a baptism by fire kind of experience almost.” Imani stated his key leadership lesson on campus was “how to deal with difficult people or not necessarily how to deal with difficult people but to work with people who didn’t have the same ideals as you.” For his personal leadership development, Steve highly valued navigating conflict with a military advisor.

But I had to learn how to navigate through his messy – I wouldn’t call it messiness but just navigate through the challenges he presented among the students. Because like I said, it was hard working with him my junior year because he was very mean and very difficult to work with. . . Yeah. Because you see that everywhere. I mean even at jobs you’re gonna sometimes approach toxic people. . .

In some instances, as Imani, Steve and Lucas described above, participants valued working through conflict with others. Differently, some participants described the importance of navigating challenging circumstances in their role.

When asked what he valued most for his leadership development, Darel described a difficult challenge when reporting his peers for an honor violation. Reflecting on this specific experience, he stated:

But I would say that's the one that I took the most from just because I had to look those individuals in the face and tell them, hey, this is what happened, this is what I'm gonna do because of this, if you have any questions you are more than welcome to come and speak with me. . . So, it was just a big growth moment. . .

Whether navigating personal conflict or facing challenging situations, many alumni participants believed these experiences were an important attribute for their leadership development.

Mentor relationships

Some alumni highly valued mentor relationships on campus, and these relationships were often connected to military personnel who coached them in their leadership position. Don stated, "I truly feel like I've had mentors at the [Military College] that I still, to this day, quote them or use things that I learned from them." Claire echoed, "So, just learning those little tricks along the way and being mentored, I think, helped." When asked which experiences had the most leadership development value for her, Aubrey described the mentorship she received from a staff member while in her leadership position.

He [my mentor] challenged me to the absolute end, and it wasn't personal. He challenged everybody that way. He was very no-nonsense. . . He was equally as good at knowing we were gonna fail and letting us do it. . . He wanted to know what your plan was. He might give you a little bit of feedback on it, but there were plenty of times that he could have stopped me, and he knew I wasn't making the right decision, and when I had to come back to him and admit that I had failed, that was huge.

Here, Aubrey appreciated being given the freedom to learn by failing and being challenged by her mentor. Similarly, Claire highly valued the mentorship she received from her military advisor on campus.

Being able to work with him was awesome. I mean, he was a good mentor. He was never harsh to me and be like, 'Claire, you're doing this totally wrong. . . ' [He might say] 'I would definitely recommend doing this another way.' But he was very tactful in kind of sharing his experiences. . .

Claire appreciated the general guidance she received alongside her leadership role and the supportive environment her mentor created. Interestingly, as described later in the findings, some participants believed mentorship should be improved on campus.

Military college experience

Some alumni participants highly valued the general military college experience and believed this unique attribute overall was important to their leadership development. When asked which experiences had the most leadership development value for him, Don stated, "I know this sounds crazy, but just going to formation every day [. . .]. So, nothing specific, just the day-to-day grind, and it was a grind [. . .]." Lisa similarly said, "I don't know, going to the [Military College] and just spending four years there is a pretty comprehensive leadership experience in itself, just day-to-day." Asked to elaborate on this further, Lisa described:

Because you're just living life for four years with tons of people that you're either forced to follow or forced to lead pretty much, and I think that brings a lot of circumstances out that require some learning or application of leadership skill. . .

Lisa believed the "day-to-day" circumstances at the military college created an environment where she was required to learn or apply leadership skills. Due to his general military college experience, Darel felt his leadership development accelerated, and this attribute made him more effective at work.

I'm glad that I was able to attend the [Military College] for four years and graduate from there. The things I learned there just, I feel like I aged four years, but mentally, I would say I progressed; it feels like 10 years. So, I doubled in experience. . . which carried out into the workplace, whether it's

been with the [specific military branch] or in the civilian side. I have just been able to step forward and bring more to the table.

Summary of most valued attributes

In summary, when exploring alumni's most valued attributes for leadership development at the military college, four themes emerged from the data. These included holding leadership positions, experiencing real conflict and challenges, having a mentor relationship on campus and their overall military college experience. [Figure 1](#) below captures these findings.

RQ2. What attributes do alumni perceive were missing from their military college experience that would benefit their current leadership effectiveness?

Alumni participants were probed regarding their perspective on missing experiences that might have benefitted their present-day leadership effectiveness. A wide range of ideas were expressed, and many concepts presented had limited connection to each other. However, three attribute themes did emerge from the data, including more diversity on campus, a different leadership approach and improved mentorship.

Increased diversity

Some alumni believed their leadership development would have benefitted from more diversity on campus. In most cases, they referenced a need for more people of color or women on campus generally or in leadership positions. Capturing the essence of this theme, Viv described:

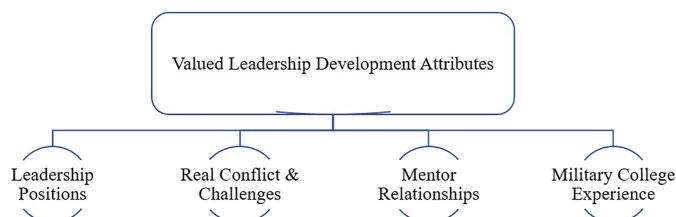
... generally everybody at [Military College] kinda walks the same, talks the same, acts the same, has the same generally morals and beliefs, which is good, we want those things, but in addition to that, you also miss some of the cultural uniqueness to having, let's say, like people of color or more women at [Military College]... having those different cultures and being able to kind of meld and give a different perspective from society I think could benefit us greatly.

After this statement, Viv elaborated on how experiencing more diversity on campus would have helped her in her current role as a military officer. Providing one example, she believed this may have given her more awareness of hair regulations connected to ethnic differences.

Steve specifically called for more diversity needed within leadership positions at the Military College.

I know when I was there, there were a couple of people of color in leadership positions. And I was glad about that, but more could have been done to help people of color reach leadership positions within the [Military College]... I know that the diversity has increased within the school, within the corps of cadets and I'm really proud of that but I just wish there was more within leadership roles.

Here, Steve recognized the institution's growth in this area but believed more could be done to elevate people of color to leadership positions.



Source(s): Authors' original work

Figure 1. Attributes military college alumni valued most for leadership development

Focusing on the need for more women, Lisa stated, “So, I think, I don’t know, having more women around would have been helpful.” Specifically referencing a need for more female military staff, she believed this would have given her more insight into placement choices unique to females commissioning into a specific military branch. She further expressed the importance of having more female speakers on campus.

I think it would be helpful for the women at the [Military College] to see other women or have talks from other women that were leaders in the community or in the military, for them to do some of those leadership talks. . .

Different leadership approach

Some alumni believed they would have benefitted if the military college had integrated a different approach to leadership. Two suggested approaches emerged: (1) more relational and less authoritative forms of leadership and (2) leading with more ambiguity when there are no clear procedures. Daniel described a need for less authoritative forms of leadership: “The [Military College] is an outdated leadership model that functions on nothing but a top-down and kind of yes-man approach.” He further believed this “top-down” approach was related to personnel choices at the college, stating there should be “less just military officers in leadership in the school where it was ‘do this or else.’”

Lucas believed he would have benefitted from learning a more relational approach to leadership. He began describing a need for receiving leadership instruction from more civilians.

I almost wonder if perhaps a more gentle touch from a civilian would be beneficial. . . I would have liked to have learned more about that and received more of that touch. Like one of the best supervisors I have had is the one I have right now. . . she has that gentle and kind of empathetic touch that works really well.

Lucas later added, “So, it’s really having, instead of a one-sided conversation, a two-sided conversation. And I wonder if the [Military College] does not always teach that approach to things.” Here, Lucas suggested that a more participatory rather than authoritative form of leadership was needed at the college.

Similarly, Mike stated he would have liked to learn more about leading with a coaching mindset and asking questions rather than using a punitive approach to leading. Describing this, he stated:

But really, asking a lot of in-depth questions and coaching more. . . I guess a lot of the military mindset is there’s different accountability techniques. I could go make somebody do push-ups if they weren’t meeting the standard. . . And some of that is applicable either, certainly things that you do in real life for corrective action and things, but there’s a lot more of that I think delicate motivation and delicate coaching.

Interestingly, Mike and Lucas used similar language, “delicate” or “more gentle touch,” in describing a shift from more authoritative to more relational ways of leading.

Aubrey suggested that cadets would benefit if given more opportunities to lead amidst ambiguity. She described her experience leading with clear answers at the college, stating, “[. . .] you have your [inspections], they’re planned, you can expect them, they pretty much all look the same. There is a book that tells you how to do everything [. . .] And the school gives you a lot of the answers.” To counter this experience, she suggested that cadets should be assigned special projects. Further, she explained why this differing leadership approach might be important in a post-graduation context:

Because when you get into the workforce, whether it’s military or civilian, you don’t always have instructions on how to figure out a project. Sometimes, it takes a lot of original and unique thought to improve efficiency or come up with a brand-new system. . .

Aubrey believed opportunities need to be created to encourage cadets to “think outside of the box and lead, really know what it means to lead outside of the cadet world of leading.”

Similarly, Mike described experiencing leadership within a planned system where expected processes were in place. He stated:

...Everything is already really standardized, and everything's there for you. You're just put into the system. . . you just lead as part of the system. But I think as a leader, understanding more about the mechanics of the system, why they are the way they are, would have been really beneficial and then maybe even an opportunity to create or simulate different processes. . .

Rather than giving cadets special projects as Aubrey suggested, Mike posited cadets might lead amidst more ambiguity by being provided the opportunity to create different protocols or processes within the corps.

Darel also believed cadets needed more agency to make decisions. Although he personally experienced oversight that permitted some autonomy, he described, "A lot of my other friends who were company commanders didn't really have that autonomy [. . .]." He further explained that the freedom he was given to make decisions provided important learning opportunities.

[My military advisor] was really good about if I was gonna make a mistake, not to the point where he wanted me to fail, but he would let me make a mistake so that way I could learn from it or I could see -. I would come forth with a solution, and I'd be like, 'Hey, sir, this is what I plan to do,' and he'd be like, 'all right, let's sit back and think about that real quick for a second.' And then he would kinda let me come up with a situation, and if ultimately that was the choice that I decided to make, he would stick with me 100%. . .

Darel believed this military advisor's approach provided an opportunity to lead and learn without being given clear answers, as Mike and Aubrey experienced.

Improved mentorship

Some alumni believed they would have benefitted from a different type of mentorship, more mentorship or better staffing associated with mentoring. As described earlier in the findings, it is important to note that some participants stated mentorship was a valuable attribute connected to their leadership development. This call for improved mentorship by some participants at least reinforces the importance alumni place on these relationships. Aaron stated, "I think, honestly, if I would say I was missing anything [. . .] during my time at the [Military College], I probably missed a genuine mentor." Although he was assigned an alumni mentor through a specific program on campus, he believed he was mismatched with his mentor and more thought could have been given to the individual he was assigned. He believed the matching process might improve by considering major career interests or personality assessments.

Daniel believed the quality of mentors could be improved on campus by increasing pay and recruiting better staff members. While describing increasing the pay of military advisors specifically, he stated:

You probably wouldn't be picking from whoever just happens to apply, and you need a body. You'd be getting people where it's like you actually get a choice and you can select the better guy or gal that would be a better mentor for the kids.

He also extended this increased pay toward faculty and believed better outcomes would result from more financial investment in employees.

Differently, Claire believed she would have benefitted from having a female mentor on campus.

And a lot more female mentorship may have been helpful, too, for the reason that they look like me and they talk like me, they act like me. So, I'm probably going to gravitate towards them more than a male that might be of the same age, same experience. . .

Claire's statement here connects to a previous theme in the findings, a call for more diversity on campus.

Summary of missing attributes that might benefit leadership effectiveness

In summary, three themes emerged from the data when exploring alumni’s perception of missing attributes on campus that might have benefitted their leadership effectiveness today. These included increasing diversity, a different leadership approach and improved mentorship. Figure 2 below captures these specific findings. Many varied ideas were also shared by alumni participants, including more emphasis on mental health, better communicating the value of the military college to cadets, giving cadets more responsibility in owning success or failure, including more professional experiences and more leadership learning in current academic courses.

Discussion

Military College alumni participants could describe attributes from previous on-campus experiences they perceived were valuable for their leadership development, and several themes emerged that connected to the literature. Holding a leadership position on campus was important for their leadership development, which is consistent with findings on traditional college campuses (Foreman & Retallick, 2013, 2016; Mak & Kim, 2017). Not surprisingly, leadership practice is one of Eich’s (2008) attributes of high-quality leadership programs, and this attribute includes practice through student leadership positions.

Additionally, mentorship has been connected to leadership capacity gains in undergraduates (Campbell *et al.*, 2012), and some alumni in this study believed mentorship on campus was their most valued leadership development experience. This is consistent with Lester *et al.*’s (2011) study at the United States Military Academy, which found that cadets participating in a highly structured mentor group increased leadership efficacy. However, other participants in our study indicated mentoring needed improvement on campus, and this could be associated with Greenleaf *et al.*’s (2017) finding that only half of the mentor-mentee relationships in an undergraduate leadership program were successful.

The military college environment in our study provided unique developmental experiences for alumni participants, including a rank structure among peers, daily formations, uniforms worn to a high standard, morning physical training and an honor code. Many participants highly valued this military college experience for leadership development. Within this environment, participants further described the challenges and real conflict they faced while recognizing the leadership development value found in these sometimes-difficult experiences.



Source(s): Authors’ original work

Figure 2. Alumni perceived missing leadership development attributes

The participants also described attributes they believed were missing from their collegiate experience that would have benefitted their current leadership effectiveness. One theme that emerged included a call for increasing diversity on campus. Some participants believed having more women and people of color on campus would have benefitted their present leadership effectiveness. Multiple studies reinforce engaging with diverse peers and differing viewpoints is important for undergraduate leadership learning (Beatty *et al.*, 2021; Dugan & Komives, 2010; Eich, 2008; Rosch *et al.*, 2023). Further, diverse and engaged students are Eich's (2008) first attribute of high-quality leadership programs.

Finally, some alumni participants believed they would have benefitted from more exposure to a different leadership approach. The differing approaches suggested included a less authoritative and more relational approach to leadership as well as more opportunities to lead amidst ambiguity. Collegiate military environments, including the one examined in our study, often include a rank structure among peers and many objectives across the corps of cadets are accomplished through positional authority. Further, the regimented environment lends itself to highly structured, clearly outlined policies and procedures with less opportunity to innovate or lead in ambiguous circumstances. This dynamic is even more relevant as the USA military has been shifting toward more relational and transformational leadership approaches due to the complexity of operational environments, an emphasis on mental health and the intentional leadership development of officers (Hoge & Castro, 2012; US Army, 2013).

Limitations

We explored the perspectives of alumni from a specific military college. As such, those assessing the transferability of the findings to their context should exercise careful judgment, as this study has limited generalizability. Additionally, we chose to interview those alumni who were highly engaged on campus and held significant leadership positions. This negated the voice of cadets who were less involved on campus and might have provided differing viewpoints. It is possible our sample of engaged individuals led to a more favorable assessment of the leadership development value provided by the experiences at the college.

Recommendations for practice and future research

The military college alumni perspective in this study provides relevant insights for administrators of collegiate military environments. The intense, rigorous and distinctive features of these institution types should be continued as participants believed the "day-to-day grind" was important for their leadership development. Further, challenges and real conflict were important developmental attributes, and administrators should highlight this learning opportunity for cadets while providing needed support during difficult circumstances. Administrators should consider putting more resources toward on-campus mentoring as participants believed this was valuable for their leadership development and concurrently believed improvements could be made in this area. This might include more spending on personnel, training and creating a process for matching mentors with mentees to increase the chances of successful mentorship. The literature and our study demonstrate the value of increasing diversity for leadership learning purposes. Administrators of collegiate military environments should continue to employ strategies to increase diversity while also providing off-campus opportunities for students to engage with different viewpoints and those who are different from themselves.

Alumni participants suggested they might have benefitted from experiencing more relational approaches to leadership as well as more opportunities to lead amidst ambiguity where less clear procedures dictate decision-making. Collegiate military environments must seek to balance the rank structure and positional authority unique to their campus while simultaneously striving for a culture that aims for follower engagement in relational, leadership-process-oriented ways. Additionally, administrators might consider creative ways

to permit cadets to innovate, make more autonomous decisions and deliberate on policy or procedures.

This study confirmed programmatic attributes important for leadership development that are applicable to leadership education generally. Leadership educators should consider creating opportunities for learners to practice leadership through experience. On traditional college campuses, this might include service, co-curricular activities, competition, internships or, as highlighted by alumni in this study, student leadership positions. Challenges and conflict during these experiences should be leveraged as learning opportunities to be coupled with appropriate support. Our findings also reaffirmed that leadership educators should encourage learner engagement and discussion with others across differing viewpoints and backgrounds.

More research is needed to explore the barriers to expanding diversity in collegiate military environments because engaging with difference is important for leadership learning. [Lester et al. \(2011\)](#) and alumni from our study indicated that mentorship is valuable for leadership development in collegiate military environments. However, research is needed to provide best practices in this institutional context and explore how to best match mentees with mentors. Finally, phenomenological research is needed to better understand the balance between relational, process-oriented forms of leadership within clear chains of command in military environments.

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