

Reflections from the road: exploring student outcomes and perceptions of an undergraduate Honors Leadership Academy

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Abstract

Purpose – Leadership can be developed through interdisciplinary teaching with a focus on innovation and design thinking, and travel as an experiential learning exercise. Design thinking encourages students to engage in problem solving from an interdisciplinary lens, often resulting in personal growth. Place as Text allows students to explore places experientially, and often results in increased motivation, engagement and learning when included in courses. The purpose of the current study was to explore how participation in an Honors Leadership Academy that combined instruction and travel impacted student perceptions of growth, learning and self-report of leadership values.

Design/methodology/approach – A mixed-method design was used in the current study. Four cohorts of undergraduate honors students ($n = 30$) enrolled in an Honors Leadership Academy rated their leadership values at pre- and post-participation in the academy. Students also completed reflection essays at the conclusion of their experience in the academy. Essays were coded and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis to assess growth or changes in leadership values and learning overall.

Findings – Participation in the academy resulted in improvement in participants' ratings of their leadership values. Thematic analyses revealed growth in students' leadership knowledge, peer relationships, self-discovery, appreciation for collaboration, connection to the college/university and place-based learning.

Originality/value – The current study highlights how an interdisciplinary, collaborative Honors Leadership Academy that combines instruction with travel can promote students' understanding and growth in leadership values and learning through an innovative model. This study also adds to the literature specifically exploring leadership development in undergraduate honors students.

Keywords Teaching and learning of leadership, Leadership education application and outcomes, Leadership education, Honors leadership development

Paper type Research paper

Honors leadership academy overview

For students to gain broad leadership knowledge, they are often required to take multiple courses from multiple instructors. In developing the Honors Leadership Academy, we hypothesized that the students would uniquely benefit from five instructors collaborating in a single course, sharing differing perspectives and learning models to create deeper learning experiences in a compressed timeframe. The course combines classroom time and a travel experience. In the classroom, students are part of an interdisciplinary cohort designed to blend individual knowledge and backgrounds to increase group connectedness and enhance peer-to-peer learning. The co-teaching environment further enables students to experience interdisciplinary learning while observing instructors exhibit teamwork, adaptability and professional dialogue (Anderson & Speck, 1998).

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Early in the course, students are introduced to a local non-profit community collaborator seeking support to manage a specific challenge. Working in teams, students utilize design thinking methodology to better understand the challenge and user's needs (IDEO, 2025). Through this process, students experience socially responsible learning and discover why empathy is a critical aspect in complex problem solving and leadership (Bringle & Hatcher, 1999). Students research and ideate possible solutions to their specific challenge and use the travel experience to gain additional insights and validate their ideas through connection with similar non-profit organizations at the travel destination (paired community partners).

During travel, students are provided opportunities to engage in active learning and develop critical thinking skills through a "Place as Text" experience (National Collegiate Honors Council [NCHC], 2024). As noted through Kolb's *Experiential Learning Cycle* (ELC) students encounter new opportunities for learning through experiences (Kolb, 2015). We know that "honors students tend to be more eager, exploratory, and experienced than their non-honors counterparts" (Achterberg, 2005, p. 77). As such, the academy allowed space to deepen students' application and understanding of leadership development. Our goal was to create a host of transformational learning experiences for students one academy cohort at a time.

This study analyzed the benefits of participation in the Honors Leadership Academy, which used a mixture of learning models, co-teaching environments, interdisciplinary cohorts, collaborative peer-to-peer learning, first-time experiences and experiential learning through travel. A mixed method design was used to generate a deeper understanding of the student experience.

Literature review

Leadership education has long been a part of honors education. Universities provide a variety of leadership courses, curricular tracks, governance roles and academic programs. These may be offered through an honors college, program or an honors course contract (Granger, 2023; Polk, 2014; Railsback, 2019). The importance of intentionally designing leadership development opportunities cannot be overstated, though there is not a uniform approach (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). High quality/high impact practices include ensuring authentic learning environments and engaging in experiential learning (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Machonis, 2008). Moreover, we wanted to create an experience where students could engage in leadership metacognition and be mindful in their individual learning and their group work (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Additionally, the use of interdisciplinary teaching has been recommended in the literature in order to help promote critical thinking and increase perspective taking within students (Looft & Myers, 2019). Using interdisciplinary teaching as the modality of curriculum delivery, we describe how we integrated these practices into the key components of the academy's curriculum.

Social change theory of leadership development

In the design of the Honors Leadership Academy, the decision to adopt an overarching theory supported in leadership development research in higher education was the first step in ensuring quality practice. The Social Change Theory of Leadership Development is one of the most widely used models in leadership education (Rosch & Anthony, 2012). "The social change model of leadership development was created to aid in the individual development of personal values, group values, and citizenship" (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018, p. 59). At its core, the Social Change Theory of Leadership Development asserts that leadership is a values-based collaborative process, all students are potential leaders and leadership practice is about effecting change on behalf of a larger community (Higher Education Research Institute [HERI], 1996). This theory has a multi-layered approach that connects well with the multi-layered approach to the academy, which accounts for the individual students and faculty, the teams of students and faculty and the community dimension of our partnerships. While there

are many intended outcomes for the academy, those related to student development and positive impact on our community remain central.

Design thinking in honors and leadership education

The use of design thinking in honors education and more broadly leadership education is an emerging area of research. Design thinking is an iterative process, and within the Honors Leadership Academy we use this multi-step approach to help students work through an authentic challenge from our community partners. Bringing community partners into the Honors Leadership Academy added a layer of real-world application aimed at building an authentic leadership learning environment each year. Community partners were identified based on faculty connection with non-profit organizations locally. Partners were asked to identify a challenge in which student teams could apply design-thinking methodology and pose solutions to the organization as a capstone activity. In the first stages of design thinking, students empathize with the users, define the problem and begin to ideate potential solutions. This process leads to natural curiosity, where learners are guided through a process using design thinking, and reflect on solutions through playback conversations. The students then begin to prototype ideas using storyboards, user personas and building out presentations applying what they learned throughout the academy. This multi-step process of Empathize, Define, Ideate, Prototype and Test from Stanford's d.school is one of many design thinking processes used (d.school, 2010; Dam, 2024). As part of the travel experience, through interviewing paired community partners, students de-risk their idea and grow confident in their approach that is then shared back to the community collaborator in a follow-up presentation.

Utilizing human-centered design approaches supports student development of empathy and critical thinking. Students work to understand the needs of stakeholders, and by using a hands-on approach, a more meaningful educational experience is realized (Das *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, design thinking fosters interdisciplinary learning through the integration of multiple approaches towards problem-solving (Lake, Ricco, & Whipps, 2016). By engaging students in design thinking within a community context, students' leadership knowledge and abilities are enhanced by being able to put their personal leadership styles into practice. Students also report being able to redefine failure and the ability to rise to challenges after engaging in team-based design thinking approaches (Lake *et al.*, 2016). Finally, students note their ability to engage in personal growth and develop a growth mindset when working within design thinking frameworks (Lake *et al.*, 2016; Sellon, Sunderman, & McElravy, 2023).

City as Text/Place as Text

City as Text™ is an experiential learning framework that is a cornerstone of the National Collegiate Honors Council [NCHC] (2024). This approach engages students in active learning environments in which participants “read” a city, neighborhood or environment as they would a textbook. City as Text™ has been expanded in terminology to Place as Text to include reading spaces that are beyond urban environments (Braid & Long, 2010; Braid & Quay, 2021).

Place as Text as a pedagogical approach uses observation of place, interacting with and interpreting environments to uncover social, cultural and historical layers of the new community. Students are sent out on “walkabouts,” which ask them to enter a place and pay close attention to things such as architecture, public spaces and who is (not) using the space, while taking notes and creating maps of their observations. The approach uses reflective writing throughout the entire experience including writing an “initial impression” essay and concluding with a “turning point” essay. The first asks students to reflect on their first impressions and how they might differ from what they expected to see or experience. The second asks students to describe an instance in which their perspective or understanding shifted. This allows students to engage in critical thinking and analysis of an evolution of their learning (Braid & Long, 2010; Braid & Quay, 2021). Recursive reflective writing is important as it allows students to deepen their understanding of their lived experiences. Further, students

are encouraged to connect their experiential learning within a broader context and engage in civic dialogue to understand what broader societal issues might be at play (Long, 2014). Reflection has a direct link to leadership pedagogy. “Effective and intentionally designed reflection-based pedagogy emphasizes the link between reflection and action” (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018, p. 205). Further, reflection paired with feedback is crucial to the learning process (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018).

Students report higher levels of motivation, engagement and an appreciation for hands-on learning when engaging in Place as Text courses and programs (Braid & Quay, 2021). Place as Text experiences also promote interdisciplinary learning and allow for students to draw connections across disciplines, which was a key consideration in developing the academy. Finally, students develop critical thinking skills as they analyze their observations during the travel experience through questioning their assumptions, interpreting their observations and considering multiple perspectives of their peers and those they interact with in the Place as Text walkabouts (Braid & Quay, 2021).

Current study

The current study uses a mixed method approach to explore how student participation in the Honors Leadership Academy impacted their perceptions of growth, learning and self-report of leadership values. The quantitative aspect of the study sought to answer the following research question: Do honors students enrolled in a Leadership Academy make gains in leadership values after participating in the course? We hypothesized that students would make gains in their self-report of consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, collaboration, controversy with civility and citizenship following participation in the Honors Leadership Academy. The qualitative aspect of the study sought to explore themes that emerged from students’ reflection essays, which were completed as part of the Place as Text assignments during travel. Specifically, we sought to answer the following research question: How do honors students describe their lived Leadership Academy experience?

Method

Participants

A total of 39 students participated in the Honors Leadership Academy across all four cohorts; a range of 8–14 students participated each year. Students represented all grade levels; in total, there were 5 first-year students, 22 second-year students, 8 third-year students and 4 fourth-year students. Students represented diverse majors (e.g. Honors Baccalaureate, Engineering, Psychology, Education and Graphic Design). Students also all met the minimum cumulative GPA required by the honors college of 3.25. There were 15 men, 23 women and 1 transgender student who participated in the academy. Students were informed about the research evaluation on the first day of class; two individuals did not return a completed consent form, and data was missing at one time point for seven other students.

Honors leadership academy

The first, second and third cohorts of the Honors Leadership Academy participated in an 8-week course (approximately 3 hours of teaching time/week), with travel occurring approximately 1–2 weeks after the end of the semester. After discussion to more intentionally pair the course content to the travel component, the fourth cohort was taught as a one-week intensive course (approximately 6 hours of teaching time/day) with travel immediately following. Although presented in different formats, the dosage of Honors Leadership Academy across the four cohorts was equivalent, with approximately 24 instructional hours dedicated to the instructional course and a 5–6 day travel window following. All four cohorts traveled domestically to various locations across the country (Santa Fe, NM, Seattle, WA, Portland, ME and Memphis, TN). Travel locations were identified in

concert with constructing a theme for each cohort as well as in selecting potential community partnerships that could be accessed during our travel period.

A total of five faculty members co-led the course, each taking ownership over certain aspects of course content. Faculty represented diverse colleges across the University including (1) Innovation and Design Thinking, (2) Industrial, Systems and Manufacturing Engineering, (3) Psychology, (4) Sport Management, Organizational Leadership and Learning and (5) Honors Leadership and Organizational Leadership and Learning. Faculty regularly attended each other's classes, offering support as needed to facilitate discussion and support student work groups. Faculty also supported the travel component by organizing instructional activities, developing partnerships with local and domestic locations, supporting student groups as they constructed their team-based design thinking projects and assisting with practical needs (e.g. driving, purchasing tickets).

Course content routinely included foundational knowledge of leadership styles and the Social Change Theory of Leadership Development and associated critical values identified in the model; application of creative approaches to solving problems and design thinking; and strategies to enhance skills in critical thinking, relationship building, communication, emotional intelligence and conflict management. Beginning with the second cohort, the course engaged local, nonprofit community partners with a "messy problem" and student teams applied design thinking skills to help propose solutions to their problems. During travel, we partnered with related organizations, and students could consult with these organizations to help inform their innovative solutions to local community partners. Presentations to the community partners served as the capstone activity for the course.

Measures

Socially responsible leadership scale. The Socially Responsible Leadership Scale (SRLS; [Dugan, 2015](#); [Tyree, 1998](#)) was emailed to students to complete online on the first day of the course, and this served as their baseline measure of leadership values. The students were then prompted to complete the post-survey at the conclusion of the travel component of the Honors Leadership Academy. The SRLS is a widely used measure that assesses undergraduate students' leadership values at the individual level, group level and societal level. Individual level subscales include Consciousness of Self, Congruence and Commitment. Group level subscales include Collaboration and Controversy with Civility, and societal level values include Citizenship. Items are rated on a 5-point scale, ranging from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). We also calculated a total SRLS score. The SRLS has strong internal reliability (alphas = 0.82–0.90) and prior research has established evidence for convergent and discriminant validity (see [Dugan, 2015](#) for a review).

Reflection essays. Two reflection essays were coded for the qualitative component of the study. Students were asked to complete a "Turning Point" essay, which prompted students to reflect upon a lightbulb moment (e.g. when your connection to place transformed your understanding of self) when their perspective or world view shifted during the travel component of the academy. Turning Point essays are commonly completed as part of the reflective writing embedded throughout Place as Text pedagogy and allow students to engage in critical thinking and consider how their learning evolves over time ([Braid & Quay, 2021](#)). Students also were asked to complete a "Final Reflection" essay, which prompted students to consider how the course enhanced their understanding of leadership as well as their own self-understanding and the impact of group travel. These essays were only analyzed for students in the third and fourth cohorts ($n = 22$) in the current study, as the essay prompts were consistent across these cohorts and reflected the change of curriculum to involve paired community partners during travel.

Analytic procedure

For quantitative data, cohorts were compared to determine if there were significant differences in leadership values reported at baseline. A paired-samples *t*-test was used to assess changes

from pre-to post-participation in the Honors Leadership Academy. Due to the smaller sample size, we reported Cohen's d to provide an estimate for effect size, using traditional benchmarks to define small ($d = 0.2$), medium ($d = 0.5$) and large ($d = 0.8$) effect sizes (Cohen, 1988). Analyses were conducted using SPSS (v. 29).

The authors used a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach to the qualitative data (Braun, Clarke, & Lainsion, 2019; Braun & Clarke, 2020). RTA allows each author to engage with the data in a thoughtful and collaborative manner. The authors adopted a constructionist epistemology, looking for recurrence and meaningfulness when considering criteria for coding. Authors also assumed an inductive, data-driven approach and produced codes that reflected the content of the essays rather than using a pre-specified theoretical framework to fit content. Two authors first familiarized themselves with the essay responses, generated initial codes and then re-read the essays to consider alternative coding schemes. The authors then met to consider how their codes aligned and could be integrated to form candidate themes that conveyed meaningful information about participants' experiences in the Honors Leadership Academy; a third author was brought in at this stage to provide another perspective at how the codes might fit together. Candidate themes were then reviewed in concert with the data, and the authors collaborated to define and name themes. In the results, codes and exemplar quotes are included to provide illustrative evidence of the themes that emerged in the written essays. Throughout the qualitative review the researchers used Lincoln and Guba's (1985) trustworthiness framework to ensure the credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability of the study.

IRB procedures and ethics

The research proposal for this study was submitted to the university Institutional Review Board (IRB). IRB approval was granted at the beginning of the study and renewed for the continuation of this research study. Students were provided with consent forms that included permission to use their SRLS pre-post survey results and review their reflective essays. Students were informed that participation had no impact on their academic standing and that any data would be presented in aggregate.

Results

A total of 30 students across four cohorts of the Honors Leadership Academy completed both pre- and post-assessment on the Socially Responsible Leadership Scale. Results indicated no significant cohort differences on SRLS outcomes at baseline or post-test, so all four cohorts were analyzed together. Paired samples t -tests were used to compare scores from pre-to post-engagement in the academy. Given seven paired samples t -tests were analyzed, a Bonferroni correction was applied so that statistical significance would account for increased risk of a type I error ($p < 0.007$). Results indicated that three subscales (Consciousness of Self, Controversy with Civility and Citizenship subscales) of the SRLS significantly improved from pre to post engagement, with small to medium effect sizes (see Table 1). The overall mean score of the SRLS also significantly improved pre-to post-participation in the academy.

Thematic analysis

The authors identified seven major themes that emerged from the coding process. The seven themes included: Leadership Development, Relationship Building, Self-Discovery, Openness to New Experiences, Value of Collaboration, Connection to College/University and the Power of Place-Based Learning and Community Partnerships. The following section will discuss these seven themes as well as provide exemplary statements to illustrate the themes in participants' essays.

Leadership development. The first theme that emerged was that of Leadership Development, which included enhancing students' understanding of leadership and refining

Table 1. SRLS scores for leadership values ($n = 30$)

Scale	Pre-mean (SD)	Post-mean (SD)	<i>t</i> -value	Sig.	Effect size (Cohen's <i>d</i>)
Consciousness of self	3.67 (0.67)	4.04 (0.55)	-5.15	$p < 0.001$	0.40 – small
Congruence	4.23 (0.51)	4.39 (0.38)	-1.93	$p = 0.063$	0.45 – medium
Commitment	4.49 (0.43)	4.60 (0.28)	-1.76	$p = 0.089$	0.33 – small
Collaboration	4.27 (0.40)	4.37 (0.44)	-1.36	$p = 0.184$	0.40 – small
Controversy with civility	4.11 (0.36)	4.34 (0.40)	-5.42	$p < 0.001$	0.24 – small
Citizenship	4.20 (0.49)	4.45 (0.46)	-4.30	$p < 0.001$	0.33 – small
Average SRLS	4.16 (0.34)	4.37 (0.33)	-5.03	$p < 0.001$	0.22 – small

Source(s): Authors' elaboration

their leadership skills. A student from the Portland cohort stated, "After this course, I have learned leadership is much more than just leading a group toward a common goal; it also includes motivating, supporting, mentoring, and listening to everyone in the group." Students' understanding of leadership was expanded to encompass connection with others; this was echoed by another Portland student, "Showing leadership is not just in being a pillar or beacon, it resides in your ability to connect with those who follow you and those who are placing their trust in you." A student from the Memphis cohort commented that they were initially "... confused how a class composed of leaders would work in a project-centric environment", but then stated, "... the more I learned about how leadership actually works and what truly defines a leader, the more I realized that everyone within a team can be (and should be) a leader in their own regard." Another student acknowledged her leadership development: "I became a better leader in Memphis. Seeing so many different leadership styles interacting with each other and being put in leadership-oriented activities made me more confident in acting as a leader. I was reminded that my main goal as a leader is to help others."

Relationship building. The second theme was Relationship Building, which was one of the most referenced themes throughout the student reflections. Students were able to grow and learn from one another, which further enhanced their ability to bond and feel a sense of community to their cohort and togetherness. By nature of this experience, many students did not know each other or have relationships with one another prior to the course. It seems that the travel portion of the course contributed greatly to the development of relationships. A Portland student reflected in his essay,

Being able to get out of the classroom and bond was important. I am unsure if it was our group's natural cohesion or the excitement of traveling across the country, but we switched to a group mindset almost immediately. We became good friends and will remember spending this time together. Many of us even plan to reach out and reconnect after the summer.

One Memphis student shared, "My connection to the cohort is definitely stronger than before traveling with them." The Portland experience was not different in this regard; as noted by one Portland student, "While traveling, everyone opened up and got to know each other; I was not expecting myself to open up to others as much as I did. Every day we got closer. . . and found out more and more about each other."

Not only did relationships develop, but deepened bonds were reported. One student wrote, "I hold each of my cohort members in such high regards and am excited to see where their endeavors take them." Similarly, from another Memphis student's reflection,

Everything from just being in the same space, the activities, and interacting in an environment that wasn't entirely college-centric really made me feel more connected with everyone as friends rather than just peers/colleagues. Sharing moments of utter goofiness was a huge part of that – I don't think I've ever laughed so much in only a few days! Family is a choice, and I feel that after traveling with everyone and connecting in such fun and innovative ways, we left Memphis as family.

The shared travel experience was ripe for the development of relationships that were described as “amazing connections and friends that will without a doubt last well after university life.”

Self-discovery. Many students felt this course prompted introspection resulting in the realization of Self-Discovery and impact on future leadership practice, which emerged as a third theme. A Memphis student realized her ability to make an impact through this experience,

I realized that I have the ability to do these things I believed were out of my range. I can make this impact in college, and if I don't start now, then how am I going to get that experience of that knowledge to better prepare me for what comes next?

The notions of self-discovery also prompted considerations for future growth. For example, one student noted, “Since experiencing [the] sense of community and connection in Portland, I have been asking myself, ‘What connects me to others?’. And I plan to use this as my driving force as I pursue my future goals.” A Memphis student stated, “I discovered that it is okay to try new things, but I need to set healthy limits for trying new things. I also discovered that I can have meaningful experiences with others or by myself, both are important.” This theme underscored the importance of building personal awareness for future growth.

Openness to new experiences. The fourth theme recognized was being Open to New Experiences and growing through discomfort. Students identified many opportunities for being pushed outside their “comfort zone” in the Honors Leadership Academy, including flying in an airplane, traveling without family, staying in a hostel or trying a new type of food. Overall, students reported stretching and thriving through the discomfort. One student reported openness to new experiences by trying new food on the trip to Portland:

A major highlight of my trip was having my first lobster roll ever. This was significant to me because I don't like seafood, can't stand to even be around it most of the time. However, I decided that because I was in Maine, I absolutely had to try a lobster roll because how am I going to be in Maine and not try a lobster roll? The whole roll ended up being one of my favorite meals/experiences of the whole trip! The key point of this is that if I didn't keep an open mind to enjoying new experiences, and in this case new foods, that I may not traditionally like, I would've missed out on one of my favorite experiences.

Another Portland student mentioned the new perspectives gained through traveling with other students, “Had I traveled with my family or friends, I may never have reached a new understanding and new perspectives because I would have been more inclined to be comfortable and complacent.” Many of the students reported numerous first-time experiences and gained confidence in their ability to explore new communities in the future.

Value of collaboration. The fifth theme that emerged from the data was the Value of Collaboration. Being able to work well with others was a large part of this experience, and students were able to not only learn about themselves but also learn about the value of collaboration. Students appreciated the collaborative approach of the project with community partners and affirmed the value of teamwork and learning from others. A Portland reflection read,

The way the project was structured encouraged us all to contribute and consider the ideas of others. It was almost impossible for anyone in the group to be silenced, as the assignments forced us all to come up with ideas and compile them.

A Memphis student commented on the impact of teamwork, “Things are so much more meaningful when done as a group. Shared interest, and intelligence, and passions can create a strong bond, and mixing with the differences, and cultures, and backgrounds of all people just furthers that strength.” Another Memphis student echoed the benefits of diversity of thought when reflecting on the team project, “I think it reemphasized the importance of relationship management and how using several minds to generate ideas creates more developed and detailed solutions.”

Connection to the college/university. The sixth theme that surfaced was increased Connection to the College/University. Although travel took students away from the university campus, the Honors Leadership Academy resulted in a greater sense of belonging to the university and honors college. One Portland student shared,

The course has also helped increase my connection and investment in the honors college and the university as a whole. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to be a part of this course. . . My dedication to my schooling has been strengthened by the course, as I want to ensure those who have invested in me by allowing me to be in this course are not disappointed.

A Memphis student also expressed his gratitude and connection to the university, “It helped me realize how great [the university] is for opportunities. . . to explore places. . . while also not paying a fortune. I am very thankful for the opportunities provided by [the university] and the honors college.” Participation in the Honors Leadership Academy also strengthened a desire to become more involved on campus, building further connections to the college. A student from the Memphis cohort shared, “I definitely feel like I want to get even more involved now. I feel a lot more passionate about being an honors student whereas, before I just knew I was in it. I didn’t know much what it meant.”

Power of place-based learning and connected community partnerships. The final theme that emerged was the Power of Place-Based Learning and Connected Community Partnerships. Students were impacted by learning through the travel experience, broadly speaking. Some ah-ha moments came through the fact that these were authentic, real-world experiences that often disrupted their pre-travel expectations. One Portland student shared,

I think being able to travel and be immersed in the lifestyle of another place in the world is an amazing way to learn because you actually get to see the people and environment, the way they interact with each other, and what the way of life looks like. It’s one thing to read about places and the things that go on in those places, but actually being in those places adds another layer of understanding that could never happen without that real experience.

Aligning with their peers, another student observed, “Everyone else in the group was sharing the same excitement, joy, and wonder about experiencing these places in the flesh which made it hold the power that it did.” Another Memphis student put it this way, “It was a positive impact and the type of experience that just a lecture couldn’t have taught me—the trip put everything in place.” A Portland student reflected on meeting a museum owner in Portland,

As she led us to her museum, we passed by several other locals, all of whom happily greeted [her]. These moments stood out to me. Coming from a small town myself, I know it is common for locals to greet each other every time they pass, even if they don’t know each other well. Seeing this same phenomenon take place almost 2,000 miles away from my hometown was touching in a way I cannot find words for. It helped me reach an understanding of the place that was more intimate than I ever expected.

The Memphis trip involved visits to Beale Street, Sun Studios and the Civil Rights Museum, among other sites. Several students noted the impact of these experiences on their learning and understanding. “When exploring Memphis and seeing historical places with a great legacy, it was easy to become lost in the moment and truly understand just how powerful these places like Sun Studios or the Lorraine Motel truly are.” Another student commented, “The museums, volunteer work, exploring different shops and restaurants – all of it helped me connect to Memphis.”

Learning also came through specific experiences and excursions that mapped onto community partnerships. A Portland student reflected on the work with the community partners in Maine, “I gained new ideas and skills from the class portion, I was able to travel to Maine to experience certain things for myself, and by working with the Community Partners, I was able to put my learned skills into action.” A Portland student shared when they were at the paired community partner site in Portland, they were able to reflect upon the similarities in working to solve food insecurity even though the local organization’s approach differed.

Through the Honors Leadership Academy, students could connect the dots on the experiences they were having in and out of the classroom and view the world more comprehensively.

Discussion

The results of the current study suggest that student participation in the Honors Leadership Academy increased students' self-reported values of consciousness of self, civility and citizenship. The results also suggest that through participation in the academy, students gained leadership knowledge and skills, personal reflection and self-discovery and appreciation for collaborative team processes. Students also reported travel pushed them outside their comfort zone to be open to new experiences and found that they gained deeper relationships with one another and greater connection to the university as a result of immersing themselves in the experience. Finally, students reported that travel-based learning provided unique opportunities to connect classroom environments to real-world experiences that informed their solutions for community partners.

We found substantial overlap between leadership values that resulted in statistically significant improvement over time and students' essay reflections. Consciousness of self refers to gaining self-awareness as it relates to one's values and attitudes (HERI, 1996; Komives & Wagner, 2016). Students' essays directly referenced self-discovery and growth, with students noting greater awareness of their strengths, weaknesses and overall willingness to apply this learning. Controversy with civility refers to a manner to collaboratively manage conflict and negotiate different viewpoints (HERI, 1996; Komives & Wagner, 2016). Discussions around effective relationship building and managing conflict constructively were directly addressed within classroom components of the Honors Leadership Academy as well as referenced in students' essays, with students reporting a greater appreciation for collaboration and diversity of ideas when approaching a challenge. Finally, the value of citizenship, or one's commitment to social responsibility and values through leadership (Komives & Wagner, 2016), also increased over time. Students repeatedly referenced in their essays how their team-based projects with community partners allowed them to make a positive impact on their community as well as how their overall understanding of leadership expanded to include a connection to others.

Within the student reflections, rich descriptive references to the overall transformational experience of the Honors Leadership Academy were included. Regardless of student major, year in school or age, students described an educational experience that was deeply meaningful and fulfilling. They spoke of the development of their personal understanding of leadership as an identity, a skill set and a practice, consistent with current conceptualizations of leadership (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Combined with their value of collaboration and teamwork, students described building strong relationships and connections to the university and honors college. Each of these findings support the learning outcomes and goals of the Honors Leadership Academy.

Honors education has long supported place-based learning, and this study reaffirms the impact of traveling and learning together in providing a significant learning experience for students in the Honors Leadership Academy (Braid & Long, 2010; Braid & Quay, 2021). Through travel students reported encountering learning experiences that lead to personal insights, and greater awareness of one's personally held perspectives, consistent with previous literature on travel in education (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Students found themselves through moments of self-discovery and were open to new experiences both in the classroom space prior to travel and throughout their Place as Text trip.

One of the most valuable aspects of travel is that students engage with different communities and cultures, often challenging their own assumptions and biases (Kolb, 2015). Deciding what to pack, traveling and rooming with someone you only met recently and suffering inevitable issues such as shifting schedules, airport layovers and flat tires can challenge a student's view on problem solving, patience and adaptability. For many students,

the Honors Leadership Academy provides multiple experiences such as traveling in a non-family group, going to a new location and even flying for the first time. While those are certainly memorable adventures, the more subtle first-time experiences can have a lasting impact such as choosing a restaurant for 16 varying tastes, doing volunteer work, being responsible for tackling a complex business problem or gaining feedback from an industry professional. Personal growth from first-time experiences enhances the development of essential leadership skills including resilience, emotional intelligence and the ability to cope with ambiguity (Avolio & Luthans, 2005). With each new discovery students reflected on their meaning-making in positive, productive and future-forward ways.

Limitations and future research directions

The present study is limited by its sample size and scope. All of our participants were honors students, and the size of each cohort was intentionally kept small. As a result, this limited our total sample size and ability to detect statistically significant changes over time. In addition, we only collected data at pre/post participation in the Leadership Academy. Future studies might add a third time point in order to more readily track changes over time in leadership values that were occurring in concert with the distinct phases of the course (e.g. classroom component, then travel component). The SRLS, although well-validated in the literature, had several subscales in which participants in our study fell at or near the ceiling of the scale at baseline, which offered little room for finding statistically significant improvements, despite small effect sizes being reported. It is possible this is an artifact of sample size but could also be the result of our sample consisting of primarily honors students. Honors students tend to have greater intrinsic motivation and be higher achieving (Achterberg, 2005), therefore, it is possible their scores on the SRLS might be inflated compared to a general sample of undergraduate students. Future research might compare these groups in studies on leadership values. Additionally, due to reflection prompts in the academy changing over time, we only had essay data from two cohorts to use in the current study. Thus, the qualitative findings only represented two of the four cohorts, which may not reflect the experiences of students who participated in earlier cohorts of the academy, and reduces the study's broader application.

Conclusions

Despite these limitations, our findings offer support that participation in an Honors Leadership Academy can result in positive changes in one's perception of their leadership values. Further, participation led to participants' expressing greater self-awareness, ability to persist through discomfort to immerse themselves in new experiences and development of deepened relationships with their peers and sense of belonging to the university. Additionally, travel was highlighted as a mechanism that promoted learning through real-world experiences. While the SRLS scales provided an important touchpoint to understand the Honors Leadership Academy within the rich history of leadership education, the thematic analysis brought the voices of the students to the forefront of this study.

Recommendations for future practice and scholarship

Our program offers a model for other programs who may want to adopt a similar experiential learning course that uses a mixture of learning models. In the Honors Leadership Academy, there were key considerations that allowed the program to be successful. These include (1) developing and maintaining community partnerships, (2) intentionally crafting both a classroom and travel experience that balances theory with applied opportunities for learning and (3) building opportunities for leadership identity development and collaboration, which we discuss in turn.

Develop and maintain community partnerships. Based on the findings from this study, practitioners should give care to the development of community partnerships and work diligently to maintain these partnerships across the learning process. Students noted how important the team project was to their learning and development as it gave them applied, real-world experience. The academy serves as both a classroom and laboratory space allowing for the development of foundational knowledge and the immediate application of knowledge into team projects. Community partners were a part of the classroom space early and often, with students reaching out to clarify questions and engage in follow-up conversations to build on their understanding of the challenge at hand. Adding the layer of paired partners during the place-based learning brought additional development of student learning and application. Finally, the culminating presentations back to the community partners upon return from the travel component allowed for a full-circle learning environment. The faculty team members built the initial connection to community partners, served as the communication link between the student teams during the academy and ensured student reports were shared with the partners at the conclusion of the program. It is critical that reciprocity drives the partnership throughout the entire process. Future studies might also benefit from gathering feedback from community partners on the value of student recommendations related to their organizational challenges and context. Community partners could also report on the degree to which student recommendations were implemented within their organization and how successful these efforts were in responding to their challenges.

Importance of design in pre-trip course and on-trip experience. Learning environments and the intentional design of learning experiences is paramount to the success of any leadership program or course. It is our recommendation that special attention should be paid to the robust development of both the collaboratively taught pre-travel course components and the on-trip logistical details. Students time and again noted how much the place-based learning environment opened their minds to possibilities, allowed them to see ideas first-hand and transformed their understanding of self and the complexities of their community partners' challenges. The responsibility to the educator is to craft a place-based experience that is logistically sound (basic needs of lodging, transportation, meals) and balanced with curriculum-based scaffolding that supports the outcomes of the program (theme, community partnerships, Place as Text methodology). Time and space for relationship building activities such as teambuilders, ice breakers, shared meals and student-led community building activities should be included. Further, time for reflection with prompts of understanding self should be embedded throughout the academy. The writing frameworks in the Place as Text approach serve as guides to embed this opportunity for self-discovery into the on-trip aspects of the academy (Braid & Long, 2010). The importance of including reflection as andragogy is further supported by the findings of this study (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Developing such a course is no easy feat and requires time, an understanding of building student travel and a great deal of communication amongst the faculty team and with local partners.

Balance of theory and application in curriculum. As leadership educators, the importance of holding space for leadership identity development is paramount. In collaborative teaching it is important for contributing faculty to strike a balance of theory and application to enhance students' leadership identity and conceptualization. Each member of the faculty team brings content, skills and approaches specific to their discipline into the classroom space, while also allowing students the space to practice and apply these lessons throughout the experience. Literature supports the positive benefits for students including developing a "more complex and nuanced understanding of a topic" in collaboratively taught courses (Looft & Myers, 2019, p. 153). The space for practice and application cannot be stressed enough. Faculty designed group activities in which students could apply their learning to the challenges provided by community partners. Multiple thematic findings from this study support the growth and development that occurred when students were provided with safe spaces to collaborate, ideate, prototype and redefine their approaches. Students reflected on how much they learned

to value collaboration and the ability to apply their learning within the team space. Centering students as co-educators and learners within leadership practice can lead to powerful identity development and self-discovery. It is important to explicitly charge students with the responsibility of supporting their peers and contributing to the intellectual communities developed in academic programs like the Honors Leadership Academy examined in this study.

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