

Creating Meaningful Environments for Leadership Education

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Abstract

As leadership educators we aim to provide students with opportunities necessary to gain knowledge and appropriate leadership skills. Valuable opportunities developed through Student Affairs and Academic Affairs collaborations which enhance learning through co-curricular and curricular experiences in leadership education will be explored. Present in these intentional environments are opportunities for students to have meaningful leadership learning when comprised of education, experience, and reflection. Specific examples from two institutions will be highlighted.

Introduction

In order to provide high quality leadership experiences for students, institutions need to consider what elements make these experiences meaningful. It is essential that leadership education be comprised of a balanced mix of three elements: formal education in theories and principles of leadership, practical experience, and reflection on experiences in light of formal education. A strong partnership between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs creates a living laboratory for knowledge acquisition, experiences that build upon this discernment, and the opportunity for thoughtful insights gained from combining theory and practice. Throughout this brief, we will share the importance of strong partnerships between Student and Academic Affairs and ways in which this environment creates significant learning for students, specifically in the field of leadership education. Theoretical frameworks in leadership education, experiential learning, and reflection support this concept.

Intentional Creation of Environments

Situating instructional and experiential components of leadership education on a college campus is essential to creating strong environments for students to learn leadership. With such an interdisciplinary topic, students must understand leadership theory, develop leadership skills through practical application, and reflect upon their knowledge and experiences to learn and grow. In order to reach a diverse population of students, both accessibility and intentional curricular and co-curricular pedagogies need to be explored by both Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. Roberts (2007) advocates for collaborative efforts which are mutually beneficial and respectful. Streit, Dalton and Crosby (2009) suggest there are a variety of structured and unstructured interactions between Student Affairs and faculty members that enhance student learning. There are patterns which exist within the variety of interactions including: learning compacts, research, consultation, advising, committees/task forces, shared use of facilities/resources, and informal personal contacts. Many of these structured and unstructured environments contribute to students' learning in significant ways.

These opportunities for collaborations are the foundation in which a successful leadership education environment can be developed. With the idea of seamless learning anchoring an intentional environment; leadership knowledge and skill development, experiences which allow for practice of this learned knowledge, and reflection to make meaning of the gained knowledge and skills are all essential in rounding out this notion of an ideal leadership education environment. Kolb (1984) proposed through the experiential learning theory that students should be empowered to take responsibility for their own learning through active participation in structured and planned learning experiences. Conger (1992) suggests four primary approaches to leadership development. These four approaches include personal growth, conceptual understanding, development through feedback and skill building. We feel that in addition to the approaches of Kolb (1984) and Conger (1992), a seamless learning environment must be created to provide students with the opportunity to reach their full leadership potential. In addition to academic and student affairs partnerships, providing knowledge and skill development, opportunities for experience and reflection are also essential in building a successful leadership education environment.

Knowledge and Skill Development

For decades researchers have explored the multifaceted concept of leadership. Research studies have produced a variety of theoretical approaches that assist in explaining the complexities of this process. Some researchers conceptualize leadership as a trait (Stogdill, 1948) or as a behavior (Yammarino, 2000). Others have viewed leadership from a relationship standpoint (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995) or from a situational perspective (Blanchard 1985). It has been argued that leadership involves a more complex mix of skills including behavioral, social, and

cognitive. This mix of skills may develop with various learning experiences at different rates (Day & Halpin, 2004).

There have been many attempts to define leadership. Gardner (1990) stated that there are over a 100 definitions of the word leadership. Once we try to define the concept, we understand that leadership can have many different meanings (Northouse, 2007). Given the complex nature of the leadership process, providing developmental opportunities for education and sources of learning is a difficult task, especially in a way where students feel empowered to take responsibility for their own learning (Kolb, 1984). In essence, sources of learning are opportunities provided by educators to meet overall developmental objectives. While learning requires choice and action from a student, teaching requires extending an invitation to take a journey of development and exploration of new information and frameworks. Providing opportunities for learning such a complex, multifaceted concept leads educators to question how this best can be done.

Experiences

McCall (2004) suggests that the primary source of learning leadership is experience. For example, facing adversity, struggling with unfamiliar situations, exposure to different people, problem solving activities and hardships, and making mistakes are reported to be the most developmental types of experiences. Kolb (1984) introduced the experiential learning theory, which describes the process of making meaning from experiences. While experiencing adversity or difficult situations, the experience does not transition to learning unless meaning is made of that experience. Experiential learning theory defines learning as “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience” (p. 41). A growth-producing experience refers not only to a direct experience, but also to the total life experience which includes experiences of others (Kolb & Kolb, 2005).

Kolb (1984) argues that learning from experience occurs in a cycle. Kolb proposes two ways one grasps an experience: by concrete experience and by abstract conceptualization; and two ways one deals with experience: reflective observation and active experimentation. Combining both concepts, the four areas of concrete experience, abstract conceptualization, reflective observation and active experimentation create the experiential cycle of learning. The experiential learning theory describes the source of learning, as well as a basis for developing and implementing leadership education.

Reflection

A critical piece in Kolb’s experiential learning theory is reflective observation. Daudlin (1996) states “Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through

the development of inferences; learning is the creation of meaning from past or current events that serves as a guide for future behavior” (p. 39). Chickering (2008) explained without critical reflection learning is not sustainable. Reflective opportunities that guide the meaning making process also assist in the growth of students’ identity, cognitive and moral development (Jones & Abes, 2004; Strain, 2005; Wang & Rodgers, 2006).

Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) found that reflection needs to be continuous, connected, challenging and contextualized. Effective continuous self-dialogue and collaborative inquiry both involves reflection before, during and after an experience. Connected reflection emphasizes the importance of integrating the experience with theoretical learning. Challenging reflection pushes students to think in new ways and produce new understanding and methods of problem-solving. Contextualized reflection refers to situating the reflection in the particular context and setting.

Theory to Practice

In order to build a strong leadership model for students, an institution needs to consider its campus culture, identify the appropriate leadership content, and determine the best ways to teach and assess students’ leadership knowledge acquisition and skill development (Kuh, 1995). Understanding institutional context is an essential component that determines how to create programs which enhance students’ self knowledge and growth. In order to be successful, each institution should consider ways to involve both curricular and co-curricular experiences and how the campus culture will influence program design.

To support this proposed idea of creating intentional environments for leadership education by focusing on Student Affairs and Academic Affairs partnerships which provide opportunities for knowledge acquisition, experiences and reflection, we have provided two brief examples. At Florida State University an 18-credit Undergraduate Certificate in Leadership Studies provides an intentional environment for students to focus on leadership education. The certificate is offered as a partnership between The Center for Leadership and Civic Education in the Division of Student Affairs and the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies in the College of Education. Undergraduate students from all academic disciplines and years in college participate in this program. Leadership knowledge and skill development, as well as opportunities for experience and reflection are offered through a series of five core courses and one elective course. First, a foundation of theory is provided including courses on broad leadership theory, skills and theory around change leadership, and within the context of groups and communities. Once a foundation of theory is established, experiences are provided where theory can be practiced. Experiences may include pre-professional activities, community service, observation, research, or internship opportunities. Structured reflection is provided throughout each course using various methods including class discussions, journal writing, reflective essays,

video blogging, and group presentations. By creating seamless education through both curricular and co-curricular programs, knowledge development, experiences and reflection, an environment where leadership learning can be fully explored is developed.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign the Illinois Leadership Center is also a partnership between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs. The Center engages students in a variety of curricular and co-curricular leadership development programs, workshops and courses. One specific example is the Leadership Certificate program. Unlike the program at Florida State University, Illinois' Leadership Certificate program does not appear on students' transcripts. Instead, students enroll in two elective leadership courses which are offered across disciplines; participate in four distinct one to three day leadership programs; two out-of-classroom group or team experiences; and, develop a personal development plan identifying two self-improvement goals. While the certificate program focuses learning around 11 skills and attributes, the personal development plan identifies two specific skills or attributes students are to focus on. Throughout the program students meet one-on-one with a leadership coach who assists the students in reaching their self-improvement goals. To cap their experience, students document their leadership development by compiling reflections in a leadership portfolio. The portfolio may take the form of physical documents or an electronic format such as a blog, presentation, or website. The development of the portfolio becomes an experience itself through reflection and the actual creation. Through this program students acquire leadership knowledge, work to develop leadership skills, and document growth through written reflection and active conversations with their leadership coach. These two institutions provide examples that intertwine leadership theory and reflection throughout a student's experience providing stronger, more in depth learning for the student.

Conclusion

Strong partnerships between Student Affairs and Academic Affairs provide a seamless learning environment for students to gain high quality leadership experiences. Present in these partnerships are opportunities for leadership knowledge acquisition, practical application of leadership skills and knowledge, and reflection on the experiences in light of the education. Student experiences are strengthened and learning is deepened when institutions intentionally create environments that integrate theory, practice, and reflection.

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