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## DOUGLAS TILSTRA LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS IS WORKING AND WHY

Recent trends in academic leadership development are instructive for those in the academy as well as practitioners. This brief review of literature regarding leadership development in higher education reveals at least four elements that most leadership programs include in the curricula. Practitioners may critique these curricular elements and suggest additions or deletions based on their own leadership experience. They may also find it helpful to reflect on the inclusion or omission of these elements in their own informal leadership development and the development of those they lead. Those in higher education may evaluate the leadership development curriculum of their own institution against the backdrop of the best practices, empirical evidence, and observations of theorists reviewed in this article. This review may also suggest to them new directions for further research or new questions for dialogue with practitioners.

Bass (1990) stated that leadership education is of major importance in higher education. Connaughton, Lawrence, and Ruben (2003) affirmed the same, asserting that colleges and universities have a fundamental responsibility to provide leadership development for their students. Some emphasize this responsibility as a function of preparing students for careers and equipping them with the necessary leadership skills for employment (Honaker, 2005; Messner & Ruhl, 1998). Others, however, advocate an even broader reason—to prepare students to be citizens in a participatory democracy (Rost & Barker, 2000; Sweeney, 2001). Still others broaden the responsibility of leadership development in higher education to include global concerns. Chambers and Lucas (2002) asked educators to ponder the question, “How are higher education leaders encouraging new social, personal and technological innovations that foster a world marked by peace and freedom, not war and fear?” (p. 12). Rost and Barker (2000) envisioned the task of colleges to prepare graduates to participate in creating global communities dedicated to the common good of all citizens.

### **RESEARCH ON GRADUATE AND UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS**

It appears that very few empirical studies have been conducted to determine the effectiveness of leadership development programs in colleges and universities. Two recent studies of graduate leadership programs explored content and delivery methods rather than effectiveness. The available data, however, does give some indication of emerging trends among the programs. Liberty

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and Prewitt (1999) attempted to locate every accredited professional leadership education (PLE) graduate program offered in the United States. They found fifteen. They discovered that each program combined leadership theory with some form of practical application, and that most of the programs were rooted philosophically in the behavioral sciences and humanities. Several years later Crawford, Brungardt, Scott, and Gould (2002) conducted a similar search and found 40 graduate programs in organizational leadership. They concluded that PLE was still in the early stages of development and probably shaped by market-driven forces. The profile of the typical PLE program, they found, was a program that combined theory and practice, emphasized application over research, and was delivered in face-to-face classroom style rather than by online or other method of distance learning.

Two studies of undergraduate leadership education programs probed beyond the content and delivery methods to explore the effectiveness of the programs. Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, and Burkhardt (2001) evaluated 875 students at 10 different institutions. The 10 educational institutions represented nearly half (10 of 21) of the institutions to which the W. K. Kellogg Foundation had given funds during the previous ten years to develop leadership programs. Cress et al. found a positive correlation between participation in the leadership programs and educational and personal development among the students. Specifically, students who participated showed growth in areas of civic responsibility, leadership skills, multicultural awareness, understanding of leadership theories, and personal and social values that were not seen in students who did not participate in the leadership programs. Furthermore, Cress et al. found three common elements in all the programs of the 10 different institutions: "(a) opportunities for service (such as volunteering); (b) experiential activities (such as internships); and (c) active learning through collaboration (such as group projects in the classroom)" (p. 23). In addition to the three elements common to all the programs, they also found elements common to many but not all. These elements included service learning to promote civic responsibility, faculty involvement with students in learning projects, student mentoring, student-initiated and student-led activities on campus, and self-reflection and evaluation especially through written journals.

A second study, conducted by Koch et al. (2000), examined 35 higher education service-learning projects funded by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation between 1985 and 1995. Koch et al. looked for the results of service learning at three levels: institution, individual, and community. They found that at the institutional level, results of the service learning program included the modification of existing courses and creation of new courses; an increased interdisciplinary focus; and the integration of the concept of service into campus-wide policies, activities, fund-raising, and new entities on campus. At the individual level, results included increased multicultural understanding, clearer concepts of the relevance and application of classroom learning, and better awareness of employment opportunities and necessary workplace skills. At the community level, results included a wide range of community members benefited from a wide range of services, partnerships formed between colleges and communities, and projects that attracted national and local recognition. Perhaps more importantly, Koch et al. found a common pedagogical method among the service learning projects in the 35 institutions, that being classroom instruction plus community service plus self-reflection. These findings are similar to those of Cress et al. (2001).

## **SELF-STUDIES BY COLLEGES REGARDING THEIR OWN LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS**

Another source of information about leadership development in higher education is the self-study conducted by universities evaluating their own leadership programs. Gibson and Pason (2003) evaluated the Pioneer Leadership Program (PLP) at the University of Denver where they serve as faculty and directors of the PLP. The PLP combines classroom leadership theory learning with experiential learning and service projects in the community. Students in the PLP also engage in self-reflection and extensive planning of service projects. Gibson and Pason's study focused on 123 PLP students during the 2001-2002 and 2002-2003 school years. They found that "students who completed . . . [PLP] reported more developed orientations toward service and a deepened appreciation of leadership and its complexity" (p. 23). They concluded that Denver's PLP was effectively teaching transformational leadership attitudes and skills and contributing towards healthier communities.

Wabash (1998) evaluated a single leadership course taught at the University of Wisconsin. He concluded that teaching non-positional leadership to undergraduates was appropriate and effective when following a method of combining experiential learning with theory, encouraging collaborative learning, and requiring self-reflection and evaluation. Burbach, Matkin, and Fritz (2004), of the University of Nebraska, found a positive correlation between the use of active learning methods in leadership classes and the development of critical thinking skills. The active learning methods included reflective journaling, service learning, research projects, and collaborative learning.

## **RESEARCH LEADING TO THE DESIGN OF NEW LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS**

Some universities have reported the process of designing their leadership programs after extensive review of the literature and surveys of other programs. These reports are also useful sources of understanding leadership development in higher education. Morrill and Roush (1991) reported on the background to the development of the Jepson School of Leadership. When the University of Richmond in Virginia opened the doors of Jepson School of Leadership in the fall of 1992, it became the first undergraduate school of leadership on an American university campus. Dr. James MacGregor Burns was the first faculty appointment and senior scholar at Jepson, and his concept of transforming leadership gave strong foundational direction to the curriculum. Morrill and Roush reported that Jepson's approach to leadership development, based on the best available research, emphasized the combination of theory and practice, the use of service learning, and vicarious learning—inviting prominent leaders to speak to and dialogue with students at Jepson. In addition, the curriculum at Jepson was designed to be holistic, integrative, and interdisciplinary.

Connaughton, Lawrence, and Ruben (2003) reported on the development of the Student Leadership Development Institute (SLDI) at Rutgers University in New Jersey. The SLDI began in 2001 after a yearlong study of other leadership programs in American colleges and universities. The founders of SLDI established five objectives for the program. The first objective was the grounding of all coursework in a theory-based and academic approach. The second objective was providing experiential learning from projects of civic and social consequence. The third was enabling rich networking with peers, experts, and organizations. The fourth was encouraging student reflection on their experiences and understanding of leadership. Finally, the SLDI would attract world-class leaders for conferences and round-table dialogues, providing students with opportunities for vicarious learning.

## **SELF-DESCRIPTIONS AND BEST-PRACTICE REPORTS**

Some colleges and universities are cited in the literature for their exemplary leadership development programs, yet these colleges and universities have neither conducted empirical research regarding their effectiveness nor published regarding their design development. Nonetheless, the reports and self-descriptions provide useful information about higher education leadership development programs—particularly when the evidence corroborates the findings from empirical research. Nine programs will be mentioned briefly below. For each, special attention will be given to the key components of the leadership program (as stated by the college or university in question).

Alverno College, a small all-women Catholic-run liberal arts college in Milwaukee, does not even use the word leadership prominently in its promotional literature. Alverno, however, is often cited for the leadership training its graduates receive (Crossen, 1997; Drexler & Kleinsorge, 2000; Sittenfeld, 2002). The Alverno curriculum is based upon the acquisition of eight lifetime abilities: communication, analysis, problem solving, valuing in decision-making, social interaction, taking responsibility for the environment, involvement in the contemporary world, and aesthetic response (Mentkowski & Doherty, 1984). Alverno students do not receive letter grades for their work, nor traditional transcripts upon graduation. Rather, assessment is based upon mastery of the eight abilities and is provided by one's peers, professors, professionals from the community, and one's own evaluation of personal performance. Alverno's innovative approach to education attracts educators from around the world to attend its education conferences. A summary list of the key components in the Alverno curriculum includes theory combined with practice; experiential learning; an interdisciplinary, integrative, and holistic emphasis; and a focus on social responsibility, reflection, and collaboration.

George Bush School of Government and Public Service is located at Texas A & M University. Classes cover topics in leadership and public administration, foreign policy, international law, economics, national security, military strategy, diplomacy, and other topics relevant to future public servants (Bush School of Government and Public Service, 2004). Leadership development at Bush, however, encompasses more than the coursework might imply. Students attend skill-development workshops on topics ranging from self-awareness and managing personal stress to building effective teams and analytic problem solving. Guest speakers of national and international stature visit campus for lecture series. Students complete internships as part of the curriculum. They are also required to complete a collaborative capstone project with about six other students that solves a real-world management or policy issue for some client in the community (Bush School of Government and Public Service, 2004; Vedlitz, 2001). Key components of the Bush School of Government and Public Service include reflection, critical thinking, communication, collaboration, service learning, and vicarious learning.

Columbus State University, in Georgia, developed the Servant Leadership Program in 1999 and relies primarily on service learning and mentoring as its primary leadership development program components (Polleys, 2002). It does, however, also combine theory and practice, and require students to engage in reflection and assessment. The Pioneer Leadership Program (PLP) at the University of Denver also combines service learning with mentoring and reflection (Gibson & Pason, 2003; Sweeney, 2001). In addition, PLP students must plan their own yearlong service projects.

Jepson School of Leadership at the University of Richmond is considered one of the top undergraduate leadership programs in America (Vedlitz, 2001). According to its own assessment,

Jepson's leadership program is built upon the components of experiential learning, multidisciplinary approach, reflection, service learning, character development, civic engagement, the combination of theory and practice, internalizing ethical values, critical thinking, and learning from world-class leaders who visit campus (Hickman, 2001; Jepson School of Leadership, 2005). The U.S. Military Academy at West Point operates in a different academic climate than the colleges and universities mentioned above, yet it employs some of the same key components in its leadership training. McNally, Gerras, and Bullis (1996) reported that West Point relies on the combination of theory and practice and utilizes experiential learning, reflection, critical thinking, and a multidisciplinary approach in its leadership development program.

### **ESSAYS OF THEORISTS**

Various higher education theorists have proposed models and made suggestions regarding the improvement of higher education. These essays also provide helpful information regarding critical components of leadership development in college and university programs. Over twenty years ago, Astin (1984) proposed his student involvement theory, which now has become widely accepted among educators. Astin stated that the greater the physical or psychological investment students make in their education, the greater will be their personal and educational development. According to Astin's theory, such leadership development methods as experiential learning, combining theory and practice, service learning, collaboration, and reflection tend to increase a student's ability to learn by requiring more energy investment by the student.

Prince (2001) proposed similar ideas with his recommendation of active learning. He also specifically encouraged combining theory with practice, reflection, and experiential learning for leadership programs in colleges and universities. Several other writers focused on service learning in higher education as a means of leadership development. Fleckenstein (1997) recommended that ethics could best be taught by combining service learning with reflection. Other researchers considered service learning from the institutional perspective and recommended various ways by which universities could become engaged institutions and socially responsive to their communities (Bringle & Hatcher, 1996; Fear, Adamek, & Imig, 2002; Gibbons, 1998). Rost and Barker (2000) perhaps take the broadest possible perspective on service learning by advocating that all leadership programs in higher education must prepare students to become world citizens who can collaborate across international boundaries to resolve the great issues confronting the survival of this planet.

In addition to experiential learning and service learning, the topic of reflection appears prominently in educational literature. Reed, Bullis, Collins, and Papparone (2004) stated that military training would become more effective if a reflective process were followed instead of merely relying on a set list of competencies that must be mastered. Densten and Gray (2001) argued that action must be coupled with reflection in education and leadership development. They suggested reflective methods such as student autobiographies, reviewing personal leadership activities, keeping a journal, reflecting on the leadership of others, and reflecting on theoretical literature.

### **MOST COMMON ELEMENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMS**

A review of the literature on leadership development in higher education reveals certain themes. Certain elements emerge as common to most of the programs. A review of the empirical evidence,

the best practices, and the observations of the theorists cited in this literature review reveals that the most effective leadership programs in colleges and universities share at least four elements.

First, they combine theory with practice. Neither is neglected. While students learn leadership theories, they also learn either through classroom instruction or field experience how to apply those theories in their chosen fields of leadership.

Second, the most effective programs utilize experiential learning. This may be in the form of internships, campus leadership positions, community volunteerism, or some other method of experiential learning. In some cases, students are closely supervised and mentored. In other cases, they act much more independently. The common factor is that students are learning to lead by experience before graduating from the program.

Third, the most effective type of experiential learning appears to be service learning. This takes many different forms. It ranges from University of Columbus students tutoring underprivileged children to students at the George Bush School of Government and Public Service helping to rewrite policy for a county welfare department. Service learning is also referred to as civic engagement or social responsibility.

Fourth, the element of mandatory and guided student-reflection appears to be present in the majority of the most effective leadership development programs in colleges and universities.

Several other characteristics follow rather closely behind these four mentioned above. Student collaboration and faculty involvement are cited as effective components almost as frequently as experiential learning. Other components mentioned multiple times in the literature include the development of critical thinking, character growth and ethical practice, vicarious learning, and a multidisciplinary approach.

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