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# Student Selection Criteria in Undergraduate Leadership Education Programs

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Citizens expect and deserve effective leadership in both the public and private sectors. In today's 24/7 information access society, high profile leaders have become a source of constant scrutiny by citizens and the media demanding results and integrity on par with the enormous salaries and fringe benefits these individuals receive. In fact, recent research has demonstrated that a change in leadership had a small, but positive impact on important job attitudes and work outcomes (Avolio, Reichard, Hannah, Walumbwa, & Chan, in press). Managers as well are responsible for important leadership variables such as employee satisfaction, productivity, and stress (Fiedler, 1996). The societal need for and observed importance of the effectiveness of leadership leads to the question, where can we find more and better leaders? In this commentary, we describe the origins of leadership, the importance of undergraduate leadership programs in developing future leaders, and the criteria for selection of students into higher education institutions and leadership programs. We conclude the article with recommendations for undergraduate leadership education administrators.

## Origins of Leadership

When examining the development of effective leaders, one must consider the nature versus nurture debate (Avolio, 2005). Can the qualities that make an effective leader be taught, or is every person born with a certain propensity to lead? The answer to this age-old

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question has major consequences for the approach by which potential leaders are identified, selected, and developed. If effective leadership is due to genetic factors, then the solution is finding, identifying, selecting, and fast-tracking naturally born leaders. For example, the traditional "Great Man" approach argues that an effective leader is recognized by specific traits, such as cognitive ability, determination, sociability, self-confidence, and integrity (Northouse, 2006). This approach might be justified if one looks at families throughout history who are composed of individuals who achieved high levels of success as leadership, such as the Kennedy family. The problem with this argument is that often members of the such families not only have genetics in common, but also a similar environment, such as high socioeconomic status or exceptional education opportunities.

More recent research on the heritability of leadership takes the form of adoption studies and twins studies, including both the study of identical twins reared apart and the study of fraternal and identical twins reared together. Arvey, Rotundo, Johnson, Zhang, and McGue (2006) defined and measured leadership in terms of the various formal and informal work role attainment of individuals in work settings. The authors found that for 238 male identical twin pairs and 188 fraternal twin pairs reared together, the proportion of variance due to genetic influences on the leadership role occupancy scale was 0.30. Similar findings were found in a study using 89 fraternal and 107 identical female twin pairs conducted by Arvey, Zhang, Avolio, and Krueger (2007). These results indicated that around 70% of the variance in leadership emergence and effectiveness could be attributed to non-genetic factors, namely developmental experiences. In sum, genetic traits alone do not explain who ultimately has the propensity to lead. Rather, leadership potential is a blend of factors with environment playing a dominant role.

## Developing Leaders

The emphasis on effectively leading companies has opened a market for leadership development programs. The monetary investment in leadership development is substantial. In 2003, seventy-five percent of large-scale companies spent around $8,000 dollars per person on individual leadership development programs, including 360-degree feedback, mentoring, and goal setting, all aimed at outcomes such as increasing productivity and reducing employee turnover (Murphy & Riggio, 2003). In 2007, twelve billion dollars were spent on leadership programs in the United States (Avolio & Hannah, 2008). Many of the nation's best-selling books focus on developing effective leadership skills (Riggio, 2008). Individuals have the option to develop leadership abilities through a variety of tools, including corporate training, executive coaching, and higher education.

With such a strong emphasis on developing leadership ability, many higher education institutions are giving more attention to the development of the next generation of leaders. Even before their senior year, students are searching for top-tier jobs through career service centers and on-campus recruitment by major corporations. Many colleges are well aware of the fact that some corporations screen for leadership ability and may even base starting salary on leadership and skills assessments. In order to serve both hiring organizations and graduating students, many colleges are now emphasizing leadership development.

Preliminary research has begun to demonstrate the importance of undergraduate leadership education on increasing future leadership potential (Hall, 2005). In Hall's evaluation of three separate

institutions, it was found that higher leadership confidence, combined with an undergraduate leadership experience, produced an increase in future leadership behaviors. Further, in a multi-institutional study of 52 undergraduate leadership education programs, Komives (in press) found that students in these programs identify as leaders.

## Selecting Potential Leaders

With the success of graduates directly influencing the college's reputation and ranking (*U.S. News and World Report*, 2009), leadership propensity should be an important selection criterion in higher education institution's undergraduate admissions processes, but is it? For most colleges and universities, selection is done through a paper application containing only a sliver of the student's academic and personal achievements (Ayman, Adams, Fischer, & Hartman, 2003). Due to the nature of admissions, evaluating leadership potential is unfortunately limited. On occasion, the institution will request an interview; however, most do not require them due to time sensitivity and lack of resources. When conducted, the interviews usually consist of a conversation that takes place in less than an hour and focuses on personality (College Board, 2009). Also, the subjective process of evaluating interviews as part of admissions decisions was found to have minimal power towards predicting future college performance (Gehrlein, Dipboye, & Shahani, 1993). Even the basic practices of influencing others, which mildly evaluates candidates on their leadership potential (McFarland, Ryan, & Kriska, 2002), are not typically stressed. Thus, a limited amount of information on leadership potential is gathered or used in the admission process. Sternberg and Grigorenko (2004) argued that if administrators in higher education wanted to maximize the chances of admitting those most likely to be our best future leaders, they must expand the range of criteria considered for college admissions, including criteria that evaluates aspects of leadership potential such as measures of social skills and motivation which better predict student outcomes of undergraduate leadership education programs.

It may be easier to consider a wider range of leadership predictors when selecting for a leadership development program from a pool of students already admitted to a university or a college within the university. The evaluation of the developmental readiness of applicants for undergraduate programs should go beyond academic achievement and prior leadership experience indicators and include the following psychological factors; learning goal orientation; developmental efficacy; and motivation to lead. Students with a learning goal orientation for leadership, or those who seek knowledge from tasks regardless of the outcome or result, may be well suited to an undergraduate leadership education program (Reichard, 2006; Dweck & Leggett, 1988). Similarly, high levels of leader development efficacy or a belief that one can improve as a leader, may be important (Reichard, 2006). A student's level of motivation to engage in leadership behaviors should also be considered when predicting success in an undergraduate leadership program. Students may be motivated to lead for a variety of reasons including what Chan and Drasgow (2001) referred to as affective-identity motivation to lead; or the student may simply enjoy leading. Alternatively, students may choose to lead after weighing the costs and benefits of leading, referred to as a noncalculative motivation to lead. Finally, students may lead because they view leadership as their responsibility; that is, leading is expected of them (social-normative motivation to lead).

## Conclusion

The need for more and better leaders is ever more apparent in our society and the world. Based on the knowledge gained from research indicating that leadership is both born and made, we discussed criteria for selection of potential leaders for admission into college and undergraduate leadership programs. We recommend that higher education administrators develop intentional and valid selection procedures to identify those students who can benefit most from leadership development. When doing so, efforts should be made to ensure that the selection battery includes valid and reliable measures which supplement academic achievement indicators and self-report measures of leadership.

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