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Research and assessment methods for leadership development in practice

INTRODUCTION

While the field of leadership education continues to grow in terms of number of programs, students, and associated professional educators, our rigorous understanding of the impact of these programs has continued to lag behind such growth. Many postsecondary leadership educators work on campuses and have graduated from masters-level preparatory programs that do not focus extensively on rigorous research/assessment methods and may, therefore, lack the background necessary for high-level work (Brachle et al., 2021; Rosch et al., 2017; Teig, 2018). As a result, researchers and program assessment staff often recognize the need to take their methodological development “into their own hands” to increase their knowledge and maintain the high standards of rigor required in well-developed fields.

Advancements in leadership education have afforded the opportunity to facilitate leadership learning better today than 20 years ago or even 10 years ago. For example, advancements in leadership education have taught us the critical importance of undergirding leader/leadership development (LD) programs in leadership theory and research that match learner needs (Avolio et al., 2009; Day & Liu, 2019) – this is what separates leadership education from expensive leadership development consultations that lack depth and involve programs based on popular fads. Advancements in leadership education have taught us that leadership is an active and dynamic process, where leadership is not singularly about the leader (Day et al., 2014; Komives et al., 2013). Those who are not in formal leadership roles are not passive recipients of whatever the leader does, but rather have important voice and are an active and essential part of the leadership process. Thus, we are learning that LD programs must be multi-level (Day et al., 2014; DeRue & Myers, 2014; O’Connell, 2014) – LD cannot focus on individual leader development and expect the team to get better, but rather team leadership capacity must also be enhanced.

Advancements in leadership education have taught us about innovative pedagogies, such as the use of podcasting (Norsworthy & Herndon, 2020), photo journaling (Buschlen et al., 2015; Rogers & Rose, 2019), and reflective drawings (Scott et al., 2015) in processing leadership learning. Advancements in leadership education have also taught us that leadership learning must be longitudinal – LD is too complex to think leadership education efforts will enact significant change as a result of a two- or three-day workshop or event (Day & Liu, 2019). Thus, just as leadership education has evolved, so too evaluating and researching has to evolve.

Impact evidence of leadership education has not been prioritized (Rosch & Schwartz, 2009), despite higher education’s recognition of leadership as a desired college outcome (Adelman et al., 2011; AAC&U & NLC, 2007; CAS, 2009; Dreschsler Sharp et al., 2011; Keeling, 2004; NACE, 2016). Demand for accountability and results in higher education continues to be high (Russon & Reinelt, 2004), yet the resources, tools, and approaches are perhaps still lagging (Piatt & Woodruff, 2016).

ISSUE OVERVIEW

This issue is focused on topics for better understanding the processes and impact of formal and informal leadership learning. Articles are designed for researchers, assessment and evaluation professionals, leadership program curriculum architects, and leadership educators and scholars in general. This issue will define and cover best practices in the design of research and assessment efforts, critical and inclusive approaches to these efforts, and timely and significant issues in quantitative and qualitative techniques. Article authors conversationally focus on explaining the significance and rationale for specific approaches rather than the details of enacting such approaches with rigor.

Article summaries

The issue begins with three articles that provide foundational understanding in LD, distinguishing assessment and evaluation from research, and advancing the importance of design. Article 1 offers specific research agendas and program assessment methods to address “what we know we do not know” about student leadership development. Rosch and Wilson include practical descriptions of how rigorous quantitative methods could be used to address these issues for both researchers and program assessment officers. Article 2 addresses the common mistake of conflating assessment and evaluation with research. Peck and DeSawal highlight the differences between conducting research and doing program assessment and evaluation when seeking to improve the processes of formal leadership development programs. Article 3 tackles the critical importance of research and assessment design for leadership learning. Using the imagery of an inverted triangle, McElravy highlights a decision-making process to better identify the match between research or assessment question and method.

Articles 4 and 5 are designed to sharpen acuity in utilizing critical and transformative approaches in leadership assessment and research as well as addressing representation in the room. In Article 4, McKee utilizes practical examples to explain how critical social theory tenets might be applied to leadership learning research. Article 5 focuses on *who* is participating in leadership learning initiatives and *how* they are represented in research and evaluation. In addition, Beatty, Watkins, Vaughn, and Robinson discuss *who* is conducting leadership research and assessment and *how* that may influence methods and findings.

Articles 6–10 focus on specific methods most germane to research and assessment methods for leadership development and practice. Article 6 focuses on longitudinal and non-linear methods, arguing that students develop over time and in ways that can't be described by our favorite algebra equation for a straight line, $y = mx + b$. Diaz, Reichard, and Riggio utilize examples to illustrate how research and assessment efforts can practically describe student growth in non-linear trajectories over time. Soria, in Article 7, addresses the “tyranny” of representing statistical significance via p -value reporting and offers more appropriate ways to measure if change occurs via effect size and confidence intervals. In Article 8, Kliewer, Martin, and Weng discuss the importance of paying attention to the unit of analysis (individual vs. team) and illustrate appropriate methods for assessing group-level behaviors and processes. Kniffin and Priest in Article 9 highlight qualitative traditions most suitable for researching and assessing leadership development and offer strategic guidance for determining when qualitative would be superior to quantitative methods. Hastings finishes the issue in Article 10 with a discussion of mixed methods, highlighting research and assessment questions that are best served by

mixed methods as well as practitioner-friendly guides for integrating multiple forms of data.

Evaluation and research efforts in leadership education that lack rigor add little contribution and even confusion to the field. The goal of this issue is to refine leadership education researchers and practitioners to better document the processes and impact of formal and informal leadership learning. Recognizing common mistakes in conducting leadership research and program evaluation and building skills in best practices ultimately improves outputs, thus allowing stronger and more compelling demonstrations of impact from leadership education efforts.

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