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Leading Undergraduates to Become Leaders: A Case Study

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*GUSTAVO GREGORUTTI, RANDY SIEBOLD,
AND DAVID FERGUSON*
**LEADING UNDERGRADUATES TO
BECOMING LEADERS: A CASE STUDY**

Abstract: This study intends to unveil key principles that configure the Undergraduate Leadership Program (ULP) implemented at a private university in the State of Michigan, USA. Through a qualitative method of case study, this paper depicts the model and how students have responded. Data were collected using a focus group and model characteristics. The results indicate that student-centered and active learning was associated with significant leadership gains among students. Although some academic settings may have resistance to innovation, the program outcomes represent a promising program alternative for universities as well as non-academic trainers who desire to be intentional about developing leadership skills in young people.

Keywords: *Leadership development, undergraduate leadership program, case study*

Introduction

Our increasingly global world endures constant, unavoidable disruption (Scharmer, 2013). Yet, American society has framed becoming a leader as a mantra based on the presumption that capable leaders can actually or potentially help improve, or even solve, society's problems. Moreover, leadership

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itself has often been portrayed as a path to “power, authority, influence, and usually money” (Kellerman, 2014, p. 153). Supported by the “can-do” spirit deeply embedded within American culture, during the last 30 years the leadership industry has mushroomed into a billion dollar business promising that leadership can be learned with desirable and predictable outcomes. Yet at the same time, the world has seen an increasing number of leaders fall from grace and an explosion of seemingly intractable problems. The recent global economic crisis has helped to confirm our understanding of leadership as an interdependent, often ambiguous process involving not only a leader’s competencies, but also implicit leadership expectations of the members of organizations, as well as other factors governed by contextual and cultural values, beliefs, perceptions and preferences (Adler, 2002; Anderson, 2008; Beamer & Varner, 2008; Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2007; Gannon, 2004; House, 2004; Kessler & Wong-Mingji, 2009; Marquardt & Berger, 2000; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Pettigrew, 2003; Schwartz, 1999; Thomas & Inkson, 2004; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2000; Zhao, 2009). As an extension of these trends, organizations today face socially complex situations that call for not only known (technical) solutions, but also for difficult personal and organizational learning in the face of entrenched human problems (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Scharmer, 2013).

Further, supporting the personalized nature of leadership training, successful leadership must rest on an awareness of individual characteristics, that is, essential leadership ingredients such as influence crucially depend on being aware of one’s unique blend of personal strengths. Indeed, the foundation for anyone being a leader involves precisely who they are (George, 2003; Quinn, 2004). In fact, leadership has been represented as fundamentally autobiographical (Tichy & Devanna, 1986). And, while much of the leadership development literature addresses leaders as holding a position of authority within an organization, many have also recognized that people are often leading others in all positions of an organization.

The idea of developing leaders is not new. Jesus worked with His disciples during His active ministry. Indeed, it seems clear that while about His ministry, He worked to intentionally develop the twelve disciples and build the foundation for the church. Further, as Jesus went about teaching, preaching and healing (Matt. 9:35), he was meeting the needs of the whole person—mind, spirit and body. Here we see the Master Teacher addressing the whole person as a part of His leadership educational program.

Recognizing the value of a whole-being perspective as well as the importance of providing opportunities for all persons to be developed for leadership, it can be understood why thoughtful educators are seeking to provide opportu-

nities for leadership development for all of their students, particularly as they enter the job market.

In fact, education in an undergraduate context often primarily focuses on theories or the development of job-based skills to the neglect of valuable life skills (or, soft skills) that prepare one to not only succeed in the workplace, but to also succeed in the home and the church—in short, to succeed in life (Kronman, 2007).

In light of these key ideas, this paper addresses an important need of many who are involved in the development and improvement of young people as leaders, both in undergraduate curricula as well as outside of academics. The purpose of this paper is to provide a glimpse into an alternative leadership training program, so that interested professionals may learn from the experience of others.

We use a case study approach that explores undergraduate leadership development in two ways. First, we review the program characteristics, then we explore student perceptions of the program. The program we selected is an innovative model among undergraduate students in a private university in the state of Michigan in the United States. This undergraduate leadership program focuses on developing the whole person—physically, mentally, and spiritually—and it is organized, not just on leadership theory, but on balancing theory development with practical skills that can apply not only to the work environment, but to life.

This is an innovative model of leadership. The apparently successful implementation of this training process used to advance leadership skills in students could be utilized in other similar university settings. We also believe this model could also be used outside of the more traditional college setting and see the potential for others outside of academe to use these this approach when considering the intentional training of young people for leadership. Clearly, when young people have leadership skills they will have additional opportunities for advancement, benefiting not only their marketability upon entering the job market, their organizational and personal performance, but the performance of the communities and organizations in which they function as well.

Principles of Training

Over the past few decades, educational research has explored and advanced understanding regarding learning. Researchers and theorists from cognitive science, developmental psychology and neuroscience (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000), as well as those from the learning sciences perspective (Schank, 2011) have contributed to an increasing understanding of how people learn. And, while educators have sought to apply these learnings, they have

found they lead “to very different approaches to the design of curriculum, teaching, and assessment than those often found in schools today” (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000, p. 3). This reveals the often frustrating distance between the approach used in schools and authentic understanding.

Accordingly, these new ideas about learning have been turned towards education to seek application to the many challenges with the existing, dominant educational system. Yet for years there has been a tension between knowing what to do and doing it. Recognizing this, Brown, Collins, and Dogoid (1989) lament that, “Many methods of didactic education assume a separation between knowing and doing, treating knowledge as an integral, self-sufficient substance, theoretically independent of the situations in which it is learned and used” (p. 32). Perkins (1992) addresses this tension by explaining, “we do not have a knowledge gap—we have a monumental use of knowledge gap” (p. 3, emphasis in original). Specifically, a similar situation happens when institutions look for ways to train leaders.

Much of the research on how to best grow leaders has addressed leadership development in the corporate world (Hill, 2005, p. 28). And while the principles learned from these studies might be helpful, they often conflict with the traditions of higher education. However, this has not kept colleges from developing leadership programs. While much growth has happened more recently, several authors have addressed these programs (Brundgardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, & Arsendorf, 2006), finding that “relatively few of them are curricular-based undergraduate programs offering academic credit in the form of a bachelor’s degree, academic minor, or certificate” (Riggio, Ciulla, & Sorenson, 2003, p. 223). Given this context, some universities are exploring various models to bridge theory and practice, to create more effective leadership learning processes at the undergraduate level (Freed, Covrig, & Baumgartner, 2010).

The program studied in this article operates on the central assumption that development of leadership capacities cannot be taught mainly as theory—as an academic subject—it must be experienced. This belief is consistent with the APA’s (American Psychological Association) learner-centered psychological principles (1997). The report stipulates 14 principles to “provide a framework that can contribute to current educational reform and school redesign efforts” (APA, 1997, p. 2). The principles are clustered in four general categories as follows:

Cognitive and Metacognitive Factors

1. Nature of the learning process. Deep learning of complex subjects is best accomplished when theory and experience are intentionally blended in the educational process.

2. Goals of the learning process. Learning goals help create meaningful and coherent understandings, especially when goals are student generated, personally relevant, and are assisted via expert guidance.
3. Construction of knowledge. Learning grows deep when built upon and added to previous learning.
4. Strategic thinking. Successful learners have and thoughtfully use a variety of learning strategies.
5. Thinking about thinking. Reflection on one's thinking and learning can enhance learning.
6. Context of learning. Learning does not happen independent of its context. The learner's context (culture, place, experiences, etc.) deeply impact student learning.

Motivational and Affective Factors

7. Motivational and emotional influences on learning. Motivation powerfully impacts what is learned, and is informed by a student's beliefs, attitudes, interests and goals, among others.
8. Intrinsic motivation to learn. Factors such as the level to which students believe they can learn and the ability to exercise personal control impact a student's motivation to learn.
9. Effects of motivation on effort. Instruction designed to increase student motivation tend to increase student effort—an essential ingredient for the “acquisition of complex knowledge and skills.”

Developmental and Social Factors

10. Developmental influences on learning. Learning is most effective when the learning environment allows for differentiated development (i.e., emotional, physical, social, etc.).
11. Social influences on learning. Social interactions, communication and relationships with others all influence learning.

Individual Differences Factors

12. Individual differences in learning. The inherited and cultivated tendencies of an individual impacts their learning. Some of these habits are not useful in helping learners achieve their goals and require the help of wise educators to help them examine, for instance, their learning attitudes.
13. Learning and diversity. Culture, language, socioeconomic status, among many others, all influence learning, and thoughtful instructors promote an environment of respect and value for these differences.
14. Standards and assessment. Effective learning must include feedback and

appraisal of student development.

These principles are useful to review and are especially salient as we seek to understand some of the key characteristics of the program reported here.

Methodology

In addition to a literature review to theoretically frame leadership training, this paper uses a qualitative case study method to explore the impact on students of an undergraduate leadership program at a private university in Michigan in the United States. Although this program has been implemented for relatively few students, the obtained experiences allow us to raise this general question: To what extent are undergraduate leadership certificates and minor trainings advancing leadership development?

The results are divided in two sections. During the first stage, we describe the global characteristics of the case in depth with details of how the program was organized, a particular concern to many undergraduate educators. This program offered classes that led to both a certificate and minor. In the second stage, we use a focus group data collection technique to understand students' perceptions. The information was collected from a focus group comprised of 15 undergraduate students in October 2015. The students were at various stages of their training and were participants of both the certificate and minor programs. The researchers conducted the interview using a set of open-ended questions. The data were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software, version 10, to capture emerging themes, coding commonalities, differences, and patterns (Creswell, 2008). The results describe how and in what dimensions the training model impacted participants.

Results

Although this is an ongoing research project, preliminary results indicate that the program is well organized and students believe they have been experiencing significant personal and group growth. The data suggest important competency development among participants.

The Model and its Characteristics

The case under study, the Andrews University Undergraduate Leadership Program (ULP) emerged from a handful of significant presuppositions about leadership influence and impact. First, the program is built on the idea that while leadership characteristics can be innate in some individuals, they can also be taught. Second, the program articulates that all functional human beings attempt to influence those around them beginning shortly after birth.

Juxtaposing this belief with the definition that leadership is “intentional, individual influence,” this natural-born trait launches a lifelong journey of leadership development, mostly informal, but occasionally formal. Third, the use of the word “leadership” is ubiquitous and often confusing. For clarity, the program considers two categories of leadership: lower case “l” leadership, which includes any individual moment of influential impact whether impressed upon or seen by many or few; and upper case “L” leadership comprised of publicly recognized authority. The ULP addresses leadership to include both upper and lower case forms, but espouses the notion that teaching foundational principles of leadership best prepares the student for both cases. These presuppositions led to the creation of a program welcoming any undergraduate student to pursue leadership electives, an academic leadership certificate (11-12 credits plus co-curricular program), or a leadership minor (20 credits plus co-curricular program) based solely on election and continued productive engagement. In fact, the program is designed specifically to introduce the idea of leadership growth to students who wouldn’t traditionally see themselves as leaders, in addition to those most likely to respond.

A fourth principle is that leadership development is highly individualized rather than a specific recipe of courses and projects. This provides motivation for a broad set of characteristics. For example, the ULP facilitates regular and thorough processes for reflection, critical analysis and application or reapplication intended to answer the question, “What is this specific students’ leadership DNA?” Additionally, the program uses a process providing fertile atmospheres, plentiful resources, student self-determination, and attentive program mentoring and coaching in contrast to a typical course-by-course pathway of growth. This allows students to productively grow their power of influence in ways most suited to immediate and sustainably passionate use—the program is flexible in this way. As a result, specific program activities vary widely by the student.

Finally, the ULP leans heavily on the practice of leadership principles and capacities. Likely all productive leadership education includes tight revolutions of theoretical reflection, applied practice and additional reflection. This is aligned with Kolb’s (2014) learning cycle which indicates that without exploration, discovery, application, and observation of results (or personal reflection), potential learning suffers in leaders as well as in organizations. However, this program carefully targets a multiplicity of practice opportunities. Therefore, a ULP classroom regularly employs active learning, case-in-point methodology, group activities and other student centric processes.

Additionally, the program involves regular and varied co-curricular experiences and reflections comprising approximately 50% of its requirements. The

knitting of these presuppositions and attending program characteristics allow fluid student-by-student program design intended to launch formal elements of leadership development, attract a broad range of leadership types, facilitate momentum-gathering success, and maximize the potential impact of each student.

Students' Perceptions

The analysis of the focus group data provided three broad themes: personal development; about the leadership program; and suggested changes. Each one also has several subthemes that are explored as follows.

Personal Skill Development. As mentioned above, one of the central aspects of this undergraduate program is to facilitate students' self-understanding. This was described as essential in unfolding the leadership potential of students. The program uses a combination of scholarly and hands-on activities to promote the reflective experience and foster a deeper understanding of the student's self. As participants get involved, they go through progressive stages demonstrating gains in various areas.

Communication. Commenting about the program, Student 4 said:

It taught me a lot more than would have regular classes. I learned how to engage in conversations with people in authority how to, I guess, get at least the information that I was looking for. . . .

Student 5 added:

. . . a more specific contribution and the ability to see other contributions and what other people can bring and then be able to put that altogether and say this is what we are as a group and this is what we can do.

Student 9 connected communication with a very practical case:

I think that was very helpful especially in like medical school interviews [where] you are talking to someone for 45 minutes and you know they are asking you about yourself. How do I come off as not cocky but, you know, still confident and hold a conversation and show them, you know, that I'm a good person

These students' opinions of the program are also interrelated with a growing sense of self confidence that facilitates a clearer articulation toward personal and group development, as Student 4 rephrased it, "I feel more in control." The next subtheme explores this idea more in detail.

Confidence in Leading. Student 10 synthesized it here:

I had an internship this summer at an advertising agency . . . my major

is Marketing and I think for me going in and reflecting on the experience it allowed me to have a greater impact . . . because I was confident in my abilities and I was more intentional . . . without the leadership program I don't think I would have seen myself having those abilities . . . my contribution levels would have been lower.

Addressing some activities the ULP requires, Student 9 remarked that developing her organizational skills have also brought personal confidence to cope with unexpected situations:

I'm the head TA (Teacher's Assistant) for the biology lab and so on Tuesdays I have 64 students that I have to get through lab and I have eight other TAs that are under me who also need assistance and guidance as to how to run the lab so just . . . just going up there . . . in front of the class and being confident in my lecture that I have to give before lab and giving instructions and even if I don't know the material . . . just to be confident enough to say I don't know the answer to that and let me get back to you with that later . . . so one of my things that I had to build on and develop was my organizational skills which I've gotten a lot better at from having to be in that leadership position.

Student 4 stressed that the program has “. . . allowed me to be more intentional in my interactions with my friends and colleagues and to be more intentional about using my influence in those situations.” In short, as Student 6 put it, “After this (ULP) training I feel like a more well-rounded person; it just makes you a better person in general.”

Better Thinking. Student 7 underscored that “I think the leadership program has helped us to develop critical thinking as well as thinking outside of the box and how we could apply it to our everyday lives . . . in our classes, in our friendships, in our relationships.” Participant 13 explained that leadership theories have helped him to expand his understanding of how to better navigate daily relationships and tasks:

You can tell who is what kind of leader . . . and who I would want to work for in a future job just like in the medical field . . . so you can choose who you work for but you can take out traits here and there out of each person just like, hey, this is going to work out the best. So that's how I have taken this class.

Students were encouraged to learn the ability to adjust their thinking based on new ideas, to not only overcome barriers in all possible ways but to be proactive in creating innovative solutions to their challenges.

About the Leadership Program. Although some of following quotations overlap personal competency development, students also recognized some of the other dimensions this program has impacted, as Student 3 put it:

I think it taught me that leadership is process driven so it can be learned, and it isn't something that you have to be necessarily born with but it is like a characteristic way to learn and develop things.

In theories, Student 9 saw a way to understand people and situations, "I think theories helped me to put a name and a face to the leadership . . . helped me to . . . put . . . into practice creative problem solving because we are faced with problems everyday of our lives." Exposing students to different theories and literature to understand leadership has assisted them in making bridges to real implications and possible scenarios to which leaders can contribute. In addition, Student 8 explained his gain through not only knowing about leadership, but experiencing it:

My job currently is a flight instructor and it does take a lot of leadership qualities and leadership characteristics . . . because . . . not everyone is and not everyone wants to be a flight instructor and I think that in learning more about leadership traits I've actually carried the most over into flight instructing and in many ways it has made my profession that much more, I don't want to say easier, but it has made it a lot more enjoyable.

Student 9 gave reasons as to why she would recommend this program,

I have had people telling me, why are you taking what you don't need? But you will never ever learn what you learn in this program in any of the other programs. . . . I feel like these are life lessons that will take you years to learn that you can learn right here. . . . I just really want to say that you will never ever learn this anywhere else except for here.

In addition, the program combination produced some clear excitement, as Student 14 put it:

I feel like I'm a kid at a candy store and I have to pick my favorite candy . . . just because each class is so unique yet you learn so much out of it. I really, really enjoy this class because each one of them are so different yet they all connect together.

It was clear that the students appreciated the value-added of this program and type of training. It appears that they recognize how the program components bridge the university and content with real personal and professional experiences that expose them to advancing both their intellectual and spiritual potential and growth.

Suggested Changes. Regarding possible areas of improvements, participants gave several suggestions. Among others was the need of a conference to share the program on campus and improve networking, "I would love to see that the program could go to leadership conferences as a team of students . . . that would be fun" (Student 14). Student 6 also added, "I do love the idea of the leadership conference going somewhere with that but I also want to give

high praise to the team and the actual program that is already in place.” Student 6 suggested that a type of this training should be available for other leaders, “Or provide a class that maybe doesn’t have credits to pay for . . . like the practicum that we have going on that can be very tangible for youth leaders to be able to process.”

The idea is to propagate the model to other sectors of the university, as Student 15 proposed, “Make the program bigger and have more to offer across the campus for us as minor students and more classes.” The overall feeling about this program can be captured in what Student 6 said, “It is still incredible that this program is different than anything else on campus and it provides a unique experience that you can’t really get anywhere on campus or any other University.” This perception shows how some students may see the current model of academic training as mismatching their learning needs, affirming the research that suggests the need for change in education.

Analysis and Implications

This study intended to explore the extent to which an undergraduate leadership program at a private university in Michigan was able to advance leadership skills. Around that initial and global research question, the descriptions of the principles used in training revealed the characteristics of the model implemented to carry out this program, though undergraduate academic certificates or minors in leadership appeared to be based on very proactive and engaging premises. As discussed in the literature review, the APA theoretical framework seems to map closely to the ULP model, as it has clearly been designed around program components that promote cognitive and metacognitive learning as well as viewing leadership development as addressing the whole person. Additionally, the ULP students are required to build their own understanding over iterative interactive experiences that imply cycles of action and reflection in distinctive thinking levels. Additionally, it appears that the model also takes into account the motivational and affective factors that influence beliefs, attitudes, goals, and personal interests toward a deeper intellectual and spiritual learning. These experiences are developed in specific contexts that settle social factors as facilitators for broader leadership development. Finally, the ULP hinged on the central assumption that leadership is best developed when personal differences are taken into consideration, and that is vital for assessing learning progress.

The data from the focus group highlighted activities and experiences that students perceived lead towards significant leadership gains over their training. Areas they underscored were communication, personal confidence and critical thinking. The ULP model appears to demonstrate that the combination

of academic and real-life experiences successfully facilitated the development of these important competencies students need to be effective leaders. Students suggested that a crucial element seemed to be the way instructors deliver and structure the multiple teaching activities, not in a conventional theory-only approach, but rather active and student centered, allowing students the ability to apply their new learnings. The principles outlined for the ULP model reinforced what participants expressed.

As with all programs, the ULP program has challenges and room to grow, but the data clearly showed that students perceived tangible and important personal development. Regarding possible areas interviewees felt improvement was needed, there was little data to support direct change. While one student reported the idea of incorporating travel to leadership conferences, overall, the data supports program expansion and availability across campus.

While much can be learned from this study, important limitations should be highlighted. The focus group of the study was a self-selected sample of program participants—not all students were involved—and while the students did report learning gains, students themselves are not always the best judge of the quality of their learning. Additionally, although this study demonstrates strengths of the UGL program, it does not draw a clear line of cause and effect; it should not be taken to imply that all programs designed like this will get similar results. Although this study has limitations, it also clearly demonstrates that students perceived that leadership training can be taught as part of a traditional academic format, such as certificates and minors, and that they have already recognized personal benefit from the program in their lived experiences.

This study provides clarity of how one academic institution has implemented a leadership development program for young people and how the students who received the training have responded. Leadership development is important in any area, and is vitally important within the Christian community. Developing leaders both informally and formally is crucial to the development of the church. With the strong student support of the program it seems appropriate to summarize the five key design principles of the program studied: (a) leadership can be taught; (b) leadership is a life-long journey that is about intentional, individual influence; (c) the foundational principles of learning how to lead are the same for leading in both formal and informal environments; (d) growing in one's leadership potential is an individual process and thus the program must have the requisite flexibility and individual choice and engagement; and (e) both inside and outside of classroom activities should be blended in such a way to provide exposure to theory, time for practice, and time for individual reflection—these different activity types should be more balanced. Designers and developers of leadership training programs of any age

should consider these principles that seem consistent with respecting the whole person and consistent with the teachings of Jesus.

While it is important to recognize that it may be difficult for some academic units to implement a training system based on the premises arranged in the ULP and suggested in the Learner-Centered Psychological Principles presented by the APA (1997), the results suggest that it is worth trying. This research also has important implications for leaders who want to shape others to accomplish shared visions. The ULP model exposed in this study is centered on the five basic principles that can also be used in nonacademic settings. Based on what was presented here, practitioners and trainers can advance leadership skills in a way that learning would be more experiential. Implementing similar models of leadership training can be the beginning of a more effective approach to the need for qualified leaders both within the church structure as well as in non-profit organizations and businesses.

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