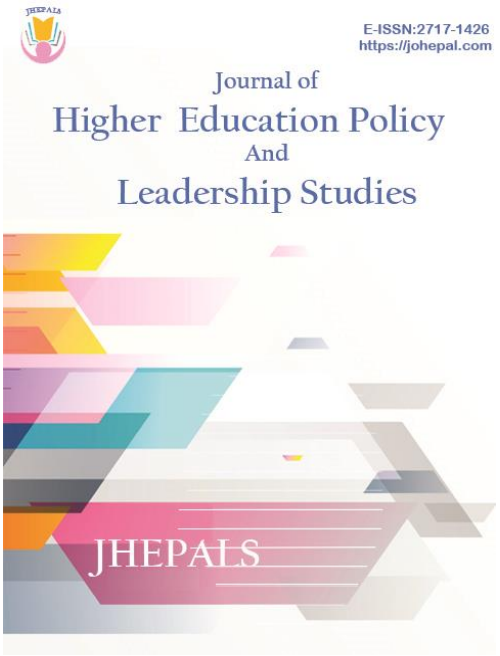
Journal of
Higher Education Policy
And
Leadership Studies

JHEPALS (E-ISSN: 2717-1426)

https://johepal.com

Reimagining Curriculum Design: Using Focus Groups to Enhance Leadership Educator Practice



Brittany Devies [1]
Graduate Assistant, Leadership Learning Research Center, Florida State University, USA
Email: bdevies@fsu.edu

Emily Ostermeyer [2]
Senior Instructional Designer, Education Development, American Association for Physician Leadership, USA
Email: eaostermeyer@gmail.com

M. Ross Allbritton [3]
Concierge, Walt Disney World, USA
Email: rossallbritton14@gmail.com

Derrick Raphael Pacheco [4]
Graduate Assistant, Leadership Learning Research Center, Florida State University, USA
Email: dpacheco@fsu.edu

Connor Dizor [5]
Resident Director, Tulane University, USA
Email: connor.dizor@gmail.com

Kara Jane R. Henry [6]
Residence Hall Director, Housing and Residence Life, The University of Alabama in Huntsville, USA
Email: krh0039@uah.edu

Allen Clay Jr. [7]
Community Coordinator, Campus Living and Residential Education, George Washington University, USA
Email: allenclayjr96@gmail.com

Article Received	Article Accepted	Published Online
2022/04/13	**2022/06/11**	**2022/06/30**

Cite article as:

Devies, B., Ostermeyer, E., Allbritton, M. R., Pacheco, D. R., Dizor, C., Henry, K. J. R., & Clay Jr., A. (2022). Reimagining curriculum design: Using focus groups to enhance leadership educator practice. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Leadership Studies*, *3*(2), 103-120. DOI: https://dx.doi.org/10.52547/johepal.3.2.103

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

Reimagining Curriculum Design: Using Focus Groups to Enhance Leadership Educator Practice

Journal of Higher Education Policy And Leadership Studies (JHEPALS)

E-ISSN: 2717-1426
Volume: 3 Issue: 2
pp. 103-120
DOI:
10.52547/johepal.3.2.103

Abstract

As educators continue down the ever-changing path of leadership learning, we must critically analyze our approach to curriculum design. A central aspect of this course design process utilized a focus group of peer leadership educators, in which the group leveraged the diversity of its members to center the student perspective and ensure a well-rounded analysis of the new curriculum. This group of leadership educators piloted an asynchronous, online, contemporary issues in leadership course in which providing formative feedback on course content, pacing, and design resulted in a more inclusive and robust curriculum. Reflections from our collective process are grounded in our lived experiences as leadership educators and leadership learners. Implications for practice are explored throughout as well. The reflections and implications focus on four key areas: leadership educator development, the need for diverse perspectives in leadership learning, growth through feedback, and ways to disrupt the traditional narratives of curriculum design.

Brittany Devies *
Emily Ostermeyer
M. Ross Allbritton
Derrick Raphael Pacheco
Connor Dizor
Kara Jane R. Henry
Allen Clay Jr.

Keywords: Leadership; Curriculum; Focus Groups; Curriculum Design

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

*Corresponding author's email: bdevies@fsu.edu

Introduction

As society continues to shift to online course offerings, the need to offer these online courses becomes increasingly challenging. Building an online leadership course grounded in contemporary issues for undergraduate students requires special attention to curriculum design, learning outcomes, and thoughtful, instructional scaffolding. It is important to start the conversation around curriculum design by assessing each of these elements to ensure students are provided with opportunities to engage with their peers and learn in an asynchronous environment. Utilizing a focus group of leadership educators, we formatively assessed the quality of the learner experience in a new online, asynchronous course targeting undergraduate students across different programs of study. Throughout the process of developing the course and soliciting focus group feedback, the instructional team discovered key takeaways for leading innovative curriculum development in leadership education. This article provides insight into focus groups as a formative feedback tool in leadership education course curriculum development by sharing the experiences of seven leadership educators auditing the learning experience of this course.

Course Context and Focus Group Framing

Contemporary Issues in Leadership is an upper-division asynchronous course recently created as an offering in an undergraduate leadership studies certificate, which is an 18-credit hour interdisciplinary certificate centered between an academic affairs and student affairs partnership. Contemporary Issues in Leadership was intentionally designed to be an online, asynchronous course provided to students through a traditional learning management system. It joins only a few other online, asynchronous course offerings within the certificate program. Each section of the course is open to 60 undergraduate students of all majors and years with no prerequisite requirements. The course uses the book, *Engaging in the Leadership Process: Identity, Capacity, and Efficacy for College Students* by Guthrie et al. (2021) alongside various supplemental videos, podcasts, and readings on topics including individual and collective leadership identity, capacity, and efficacy, engaging in difficult conversations, accountability, ethical leadership, and applying the culturally relevant leadership learning (CRLL) model.

Before the curriculum was developed, the curriculum developers and their program director did an external scan to see if peer institutions had any similar courses on contemporary issues in leadership for ideas of how to make this course come to fruition. The search resulted in a lack of comparable syllabi. Due to the nature of the course, feedback on content, course flow, and overall learner experience was needed to identify areas of strengths and improvement before initiating the course rollout. To achieve this need, a pilot committee was created to engage with course content and evaluate the course from the perspective of enrolled students. This focus group was both a need and a want from the initial curriculum developers; it was needed to get formative feedback from a group of colleagues with diverse experiences to create an inclusive course and a desire to create a course on a topic not often addressed in undergraduate curriculums. As explored later in this article, the process was mutually beneficial. Collaborators within the focus group gained skills in curriculum design and leadership educator preparation, and the developers of the course delivered an innovative, culturally responsive leadership curriculum.

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

The pilot committee consisted of seven individuals each with professional and academic experience in leadership education. All committee members were also graduate students in the Higher Education program at the institution developing this course. The committee included three curriculum developers and four collaborators. Applying a liberatory lens, moving forward, we use the language of curriculum developers and collaborators. In doing so, we seek to name the power inherent in feedback-based, focus groups and work to deconstruct traditional hierarchical structures inherent in curriculum development work. The curriculum developers included two doctoral students and one master's student. These three individuals were initially responsible for designing the course and were directly supported by the program director in their collective charge for this new curriculum. After a semester of engaging with the design process, they decided to create a focus group to conduct a pilot study for the course. The curriculum developers facilitated the focus group, guided the conversations, and elicited formative feedback to make changes to course content and design. The collaborators pilot-tested the new course for a semester and provided formative feedback on the content, design, and overall curriculum of the course.

To pilot test the course, the collaborators were enrolled as students in the Contemporary Issues in Leadership class via a learning management system. Collaborators engaged in weekly, modular instruction as undergraduate students would, in which they learn about a designated concept through readings and other accompanying materials. Each week, collaborators provided feedback on the module's content, two different discussion board prompts, accompanying materials, and alignment to course and weekly learning outcomes throughout. The collaborators were asked to go through each module, one week at a time as an enrolled student would, and review the material and discussion board questions. The collaborators filled out an online survey to assess if the module met the intended learning outcomes for that week, if the discussion board prompts were clear and engaging, and if there were any relevant topics or resources missing from that week's module. By providing formative feedback on the modules in real time, the collaborators could also provide feedback about content quality, level of engagement, and instructional scope and sequence throughout the semester.

The collaborators and curriculum developers met virtually bi-weekly to discuss the previous two modules that the collaborators had completed. Curriculum developers prepared questions in advance to guide the discussion and solicit detailed feedback about instructional effectiveness from the collaborators. Curriculum developers immediately applied this formative feedback as the developed and released the proceeding modules to collaborators. We acknowledge not every department has a team of leadership educators who can take a semester to review a course and provide feedback. However, utilizing a network of critical friends in the field, such as trusted colleagues, peers from graduate school, or even current undergraduate students are other approaches that can be used to garner formative feedback to inform and update course curriculum (Owen et al., 2020).

Review of Related Literature

A review of the relevant literature provides rationale for our course design process decisions as instructors, and context for our reflections as leadership educators. Specifically, the role of leadership education in the context of higher education institutions and the process of

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

leadership educator professional identity development informed our course development. A review of the research on leadership education identity development, strategies for developing engaging online courses, and inclusive integration of diverse perspectives aided us in discovering innovative approaches to curriculum design.

Leadership Educator Identity Development

Even a cursory review of university mission and value statements showcases how many higher education institutions aspire to facilitate the leadership development of their students (Delbert & Jacobs, 2021). Over the past several decades, academic leadership programs have emerged as one lever for facilitating student leadership development (Komives et al., 2011). Leadership educators can be understood as those individuals who provide leadership education, training, development, and engagement opportunities, and in our case, within curricular and co-curricular contexts in higher education (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Scholars have attempted to conceptualize the stages of leadership educator identity development and how gained experiences impact leadership educator identity (Seemiller & Priest, 2015). We consider the collaborative development of a leadership education course such an experience.

Seemiller and Priest (2015) proposed four spaces of leadership educator identity development, suggesting "individuals move forward and backwards through identity spaces (exploration, experimentation, validation, and confirmation) as a result of the impact of both ongoing influences as well as positive and negative critical incidents" (p. 135). Exploration can occur simultaneously along the other three phases and is the space in which leadership educators attain new information and determine if and to what extent they will adopt elements of a leadership educator identity. Experimentation is the stage in which an individual "tries on" different aspects of leadership educator identity. Validation consists of "proving" the possession of that identity element, through various means of social legitimization. Confirmation is the process of attaining membership in a leadership education community of practice (Seemiller & Priest, 2015). Seemiller and Priest (2015) explain the formation of a leadership educator identity is influenced by many factors, such as personal identities, context, and expertise. Critical incidents or positive or negative impactful experiences catalyze progress within the leadership educator identity development model.

Jenkins (2019) conducted a phenomenological study of leadership educators and found participants often engaged in a critical emerging leadership educator experience, such as graduate assistantships in student affairs, that began to shape their identities and beliefs as a leadership educator. As leadership educators moved into the Confirmation space of their professional identity development, the individuals were often mentored and led by more seasoned professionals (Jenkins, 2019). Priest & Jenkins's (2019) framework of leadership educator professional development includes foundational knowledge, teaching and learning, identity, and research and creative work. Specifically, they write, "becoming and being a leadership educator involves engagement with and interaction among these domains, within the contexts and communities in which one belongs" (Priest & Jenkins, 2019, p. 11). In developing a leadership educator professional identity, Priest & Jenkins (2019) emphasized the importance of engaging with each domain within communities of practice within our own contexts, much like this focus group process achieved.

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

Developing Inclusive Curriculum and Incorporating Diverse Perspectives

The COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the "multiple pandemics," such as racial injustice and global inequity the health crisis made salient, substantially impacted how higher education practitioners conceptualize course delivery (Guthrie & Priest, 2022). The disruptive force of the health crisis impacted higher education and its role in dismantling social inequities (Blankenberger & Williams, 2020). As practitioners and faculty rethink how to best meet student learning needs, curriculum development teams can also reconsider traditional approaches to course design, especially leadership education. More universities across the globe are considering how they develop inclusive curriculums that best address the range of learning needs and backgrounds of their diverse student populations (Dracup et al., 2020).

Dracup et al. (2020) discuss how creating collaborative groups of faculty and staff to review and revise established curriculum is important to begin incorporating inclusive teaching practices, such as including clarifying and detailing assignment instructions, providing summary "fact-sheets" of content, creating opportunities for peer feedback, and improved student outcomes. Further, researchers found that consistently creating space for teaching staff to reflect and strategize with colleagues on best teaching practices was beneficial for instructional staff (Dracup et al., 2020). Curriculum developers and collaborators for our course worked to create such a space in which trust and vulnerability were prioritized, and diverse perspectives were honored and integrated. Specifically, curriculum developers sought to establish psychological safety among collaborators. Edmondson (1999) defines the term psychological safety "as a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking" (p. 354), and teams that have it tend to perform better. Specifically, research on the topic of psychological safety suggests established mutual trust and respect among group members facilitates individuals' willingness to speak up and provide feedback without being afraid of punishment or rejection (Edmondson, 1999).

To center diverse perspectives in the course development process, our curriculum developers and collaborates applied the civic-minded instructional designers (CMID) framework, which encourages instructional designers to critically reflect on the role of their professional identities and their instructional design practice (Yusop & Correia, 2012). This framework encourages the reframing of instructional designers as agents for social change who adopt a civic-minded approach to their curriculum development process (Yusop & Correia, 2012). Civic-minded instructional designers work with community partners, members, and collaborators in the curriculum development process and gather input from stakeholders throughout the design process (Yusop & Correia, 2014). Additionally, in the context of leadership curriculum development, engaging liberatory praxis is essential (Freire, 2000). Beatty and Manning-Ouelette (2018) stated, "thoughtfully employing a liberatory pedagogy invites leadership educators to leverage critical and intersectional/systemic lenses. These lenses leverage personal experiences toward the interrogation and reconstruction of educational content, approaches, structures, and contexts" (p. 230).

Strategies for Online Course Development

In developing a new leadership education course grounded in contemporary issues, our team sought to apply established and effective strategies for online course development, and solicit feedback from collaborators about whether these strategies facilitated engaging

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

online learning. Critical to any online instruction is ensuring Moore's (1989) three types of interaction, so that students experience quality engagement with course content, peers, and instructors. Creating engaging instructional content along these dimensions can be accomplished through integrating materials that reflect the cultural and economic diversity of students, including multiple content mediums for students to engage with course materials, and designing clear, measurable learning outcomes to assess student learning (Lewis, 2020). Moreno and Mayer (2007) also found that students learn effectively in multimodal environments when they can control the pace of instructional material.

To anticipate and ensure learner satisfaction, instructional design teams facilitated pilot studies where focus groups solicited feedback on the learning experience (Tainish, 2007). The structure of our focus group feedback meetings resembled the common strategy of learning design meetings, in which instructional designers, course facilitators, faculty, and other stakeholders discuss course content, learning outcomes, and potential content revisions (Shaver, 2017). As the instructional design team, curriculum developers and collaborators sought to facilitate clear communication regarding development processes, timelines, and expectations to support the collaborative curriculum development process (Crowley et al., 2018). The literature suggested that focus groups are "most effective where groups are comfortable, there is no peer pressure and intimate topics are not being discussed" (Tainish, 2007, p. 164). To facilitate effective focus group discussions, we sought to apply a community of practice framework to communicate a "conception of curriculum leadership that is distributed rather than hierarchical" (Briggs, 2007, p. 706).

Reflections and Considerations for Practice

Reflection on our focus group process led to four emergent themes from this process: growth of leadership educator identity through collaboration, the need for diverse perspectives and group dynamics in leadership learning, growth through feedback, and ways to disrupt the traditional narratives of curriculum design. For each theme presented, reflections of the group's experience are explored alongside considerations for practice.

Growth of Leadership Educator Identity through Collaboration

Using a focus group process to develop this leadership curriculum reinforced the need for leadership educator professional development among emerging practitioners and scholars. Leadership education is grounded in the belief that leadership can be learned and is a lifelong learning journey (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Komives et al., 2005; Parks, 2005). Leadership educators are lifelong learners of leadership and continuously develop their own leadership educator professional identity (Seemiller & Priest, 2015). Calling in emerging professional voices to the course development process provided critical perspectives that challenged curriculum developer assumptions and resulted in significant changes to the course design.

Reflections from Our Process

Although the focus group was originally intended to provide content feedback on the drafted curriculum, it was also created as a professional development opportunity for both the curriculum developers and collaborators. While all four collaborators of the focus group and two of the curriculum developers completed a required leadership educator course in

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

their graduate program, this curriculum creation and feedback process was an additional, experiential opportunity for them to continue developing their own leadership educator identity and best practices. Calling in the multiple voices in this group became a value-added process to not only the course, but to the development of all team members as they continued to learn different perspectives regarding the design of learning outcomes, scaffolding, and consistency in asynchronous leadership curriculum. Simultaneously, group members engaged in impactful moments of personal development, or critical incidents (Seemiller & Priest, 2015), as they challenged and empowered one another to use their voices to advocate for change and serve students, enhanced their own leadership capacities, and created a curriculum grounded in culturally relevant leadership learning. Reflections about the course development process revealed that as curriculum developers and collaborators engaged in the focus group process, they explored, experimented, validated, and confirmed various dimensions of their identity, capacity, and efficacy as leadership educators.

In the final meeting of the focus group, the collaborators in the group shared reflections that showed their growth from the first week of the pilot study to the last meeting. Lessons learned ranged from being more intentional with the design of learning outcomes in co-curricular and curricular spaces, to having a deeper sense of culturally relevant pedagogy and its essential place in leadership education. Several members shared the value in seeing concepts they learned in their graduate leadership educator course come to life in this hands-on focus group experience; it was an opportunity to apply the scholarship they had learned into practice in a medium that was impactful long after the conclusion of the semester experience. As members of the focus group engaged in the course development process, each individual experienced various degrees of mentorship within a professional community, resulting in both a better course and the professional development of each leadership educator.

Considerations for Practice

"Looking toward the future of leadership educator development, both curricular and cocurricular opportunities will need to interrogate pedagogy, propositions, and paradigms to advance an inclusive praxis that acknowledges the historical underpinnings of power and privilege" (Pierre et al., 2020, p. 57). Simultaneously, the development of the course consisted of critical leadership educators who worked to ensure this course did not perpetuate the historically dominant narratives in leadership (Dugan, 2017). In doing so, we hope this practice helped to "address hegemonic reproduction (e.g., through theories, literature, and pedagogy) to create socially just and critical approaches" (Pierre et al., 2020, p. 57). It was the collective belief of the focus group that leadership education and social justice are and must be interwoven in our collective practice (Chunoo et al., 2019).

It is imperative to remember leadership educator development is not a one size fits all concept. While there are academic programs, courses, and formal experiences committed to leadership educator development, those may not be accessible for all emerging leadership educators. Even though this process was over one semester, it was a one to two hour a week commitment that was manageable with competing commitments. It also served as a feasible value-added experience to a group of emerging leadership educators who sought hands-on opportunities to continue developing their own leadership educator

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

identities. The curriculum developers intentionally crafted the group so the collaborators would know the experience would be developmental to their professional identity in addition to developing a strong leadership curriculum. This application of liberatory pedagogy promoted "the development of educational practices that encourage educators and students to critically examine and identify relationships of power, ideology, and culture; and then how this critical investigation can then inform praxis" (Beatty & Manning-Ouellette, 2018, p. 234). Using development opportunities like this one can led to emerging leadership educators that interrogate hegemonic power and social inequities in their practice.

In crafting developmental leadership educator preparatory experiences, creativity can help lead to more accessible opportunities and innovative practices. While this focus group process was new and innovative to our previous curriculum creation process, it also led to new and innovative practices utilized within the course as the diverse perspectives of the focus group challenged all of us to reimagine how we deliver content, engage in online, asynchronous learning, and learn leadership. At the end of our semester together, the focus group's biggest lesson in the theme of leadership educator preparation was that these leadership education developmental experiences should be a constant calling in process which facilitates team psychological safety. Leadership educators must be calling in new voices in leadership education to spaces as well as being receptive to feedback on how to continue to evolve and innovate as a field.

Diverse Perspectives and Group Dynamics in Leadership Learning

From the backgrounds and perspectives of the focus group, the emerging need to include diverse experiences in our work as leadership educators, scholars, and practitioners is evident. Leadership education should strive to be culturally relevant and inclusive of diverse perspectives and voices. The goal of culturally relevant pedagogy is to ensure that curriculum is focused on academic success, cultural competence, and critical consciousness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Beatty & Manning-Ouellette (2018) also mention how we should focus "on moving toward a more socially just leadership praxis by offering a pedagogical approach; one that considers the complexity of leadership educators' identities and the learning spaces they operate within" (p. 230). Focusing on the diverse experiences and interests of the collaborators allowed us to explore their unique contributions to the field and how those experiences contributed to the dynamics of the focus group and the enhancement of the culturally relevant curriculum. Not only should these diverse perspectives be utilized in focus groups, but they should also be amplified in curricular and co-curricular leadership learning spaces with students and colleagues.

Reflections from Our Process

Collaborators were recruited and informed of the opportunity to participate in this focus group. Many of the diverse experiences and perspectives of these collaborators were considered to gain as many critical perspectives as possible. As noted in Jones (2016), "taking an intersectional view on leadership provides a powerful tool for intercultural engagement and promotes culturally relevant leadership practices" (p. 33). Project collaborators came from diverse backgrounds and different functional areas across campus, such as student conduct, career services, fraternity and sorority life, and residence life. The unique lived experiences of the collaborators aided in the creation, amendment, and removal of various

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

components of the curriculum. Some of these components were the supplemental items to course lectures (videos, podcasts, and additional readings), the rephrasing of learning outcomes, revising of assignment instructions, and the course schedule. Due to these diverse viewpoints, the curriculum developers received feedback and suggestions from the group to enhance the curriculum of the course and be more inclusive of our undergraduate student population's lived experiences.

As graduate students, all collaborators were engaged in various entry-level internship and graduate assistantship experiences in diverse functional areas during the time of the focus group. Their work in student activities, student governance and advocacy, assessment and evaluation, and leadership education allowed for additional knowledge on how to better engage in the leadership process, and enhanced both the curriculum developers' and collaborators' understanding of their own leadership educator identities. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, many higher education institutions shifted their course modalities from traditional brick and mortar classrooms to an online learning environment. Due to this shift, the collaborators interacted with this course exactly as undergraduate students are intended to do, as an online asynchronous course. This experience allowed the collaborators to understand what undergraduate students experience while learning and interacting with one another as a group.

Considerations for Practice

This process highlighted the importance and need for leadership educator training experiences for early-career professionals entering the field. Leadership training experiences intend to continuously develop multidisciplinary skills for those who participate and engage with the material to better enhance specific practices in the field (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). As these diverse experiences were showcased in the focus group, the collaborators were able to leverage in the curriculum development process by drawing in their prior experiences in curricular and co-curricular spaces. This showcases the need for leadership educator training in both curricular and co-curricular spaces prioritizing spaces for diverse students and their perspectives. As one of our focus group collaborators said best, "we need diverse perspectives in creating the course because diverse perspectives will be taking the course." Leadership education is necessary in all aspects of our field to create better practitioners and scholars. As an implication for practice, making sure to have individuals from diverse perspectives is essential in creating leadership education curriculum.

Drawing on the cross functional area interests and experiences our curriculum developers and collaborators had, we learned how important it is to incorporate diverse experiences into leadership education. Mahoney (2016) noted many introductory leadership courses lack diverse voices in the curriculum. As a consideration for practice, we noted the need to include these diverse experiences to better include leadership education in different functional areas. With proper leadership educator training rooted in theory to practice, we can utilize the work done in these spaces to continually inform our profession on best practices involving culturally relevant leadership pedagogy and equity in leadership curriculum creation. To achieve culturally relevant leadership learning and education, we must reflect, engage, and offer different perspectives to disrupt historical norms and amplify the diverse voices of all learners.

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

Reimagining Curriculum Design

From a functional standpoint, graduate students from diverse backgrounds who had a vested interest in leadership education were selected to participate as collaborators on this project. As mentioned in Guthrie & Jenkins (2018), student affairs practitioners are leadership educators. For those institutions who may not have this human capital of graduate students, it is imperative that student affairs practitioners step up to this role as collaborators to make sure students receive a leadership education experience that is cross-functional and can apply to contemporary issues along an entire division. In addition to seeking this feedback from practitioners, this will allow students, and those involved with the course design process, the ability to identify current trends at institutions that can aid in the overall betterment of their campus climate and culture.

Unanticipated Growth through Feedback

One of the themes we discovered during this focus group process was the importance of incorporating honest and constructive feedback. The main purpose of piloting this course was to obtain commentary on the curriculum quality and implement it to make improvements. The course developers and collaborators learned that both giving and receiving feedback is a developed skill (Volpe White et al., 2019). It takes practice and communication to both provide sufficient feedback that will be helpful and to make meaning of it. To give and receive feedback effectively, both the collaborators and curriculum developers realized facilitating team psychological safety and creating a space built on mutual trust and respect was essential. For feedback to be most beneficial, they knew they wanted to create a team environment in which feedback is respected and valued early on (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Trust and vulnerability were critical to the reflections and considerations for the practice of feedback.

Reflections from Our Process

Curriculum developers sought feedback from focus group collaborators regarding to what extent course content was engaging against these criteria. During the final wrap-up meeting at the end of the focus group period, two main reflections on feedback emerged – the practice of the focus group improved individual feedback skills (professional development) and exchanging feedback required group dynamics centered on trust (personal development). At the beginning of the semester when the team started meeting as a focus group, the collaborators were still learning about the course's purpose and how it was structured. The curriculum developers were also conceptualizing what type of feedback they wanted on course content and curriculum. One collaborator commented there was too much content to focus on each week; they did not feel that they could give adequate feedback on anything. As the semester and meetings progressed, collaborators improved in offering specific and constructive feedback with examples of alternative wording or better resources; curriculum developers started to ask for feedback on specific areas or topics in each module. Ultimately, the process of participating in and facilitating focus groups developed the constructive feedback skills of the entire team.

One of the essential factors that helped the group develop better feedback skills was building relationships as a team. All the group members knew each other to varying degrees before the focus groups started, which helped to establish a foundation of trust. One of the curriculum developers noted that even though they all knew each other, they felt there was

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

some hesitancy from the collaborators to provide feedback at the beginning of the process, potentially due to the collaborators not wanting to offend the curriculum developers. To help the collaborators feel safe to provide constructive feedback, the curriculum developers modeled vulnerability to create trust. The curriculum developers, as the original content creators, displayed vulnerability by admitting sections of the course they felt lacked clarity and asked for specific feedback on those areas. The collaborators appreciated acknowledging areas that needed improvement and felt they were trusted by the curriculum developers to provide and receive feedback. Eventually, the collaborators also showed vulnerability and trust by providing critical feedback in constructive ways, such as stating one module contained too many articles and providing a relevant video to the topic to supplement learning instead. The collaborators shared this feedback knowing they would not damage relationships with curriculum developers. Through using vulnerability as a tool to build trust and establish team psychological safety, the collaborators and curriculum developers created stronger group dynamics that led to useful feedback.

Considerations for Practice

The lessons of improving feedback skills and using vulnerability to build trust hold implications for future practice. The two ways the curriculum developers gathered feedback were through an online survey form and guided conversations during synchronous bi-weekly meetings. Each week, the collaborators were asked to complete a survey about a course module. The survey evaluated if the learning outcomes were met, general thoughts for improvement, and thoughts for additional or different ways to engage that week's topic. This survey was meant to be completed before the following scheduled focus group meeting so the curriculum developers could use the data to guide the conversation. During the final wrap-up meeting, the collaborators learned the intention was for the forms to guide the meetings, but the collaborators used the surveys to take notes and offer supplemental feedback outside of the meetings. One of the curriculum developers commented that, for future practice, holding a conversation at the beginning of the semester about how each participant best gives feedback would have been helpful. Not only would having a conversation about giving and receiving feedback be developmental for the collaborators to reflect on how they best provide feedback, but also for the curriculum developers to reflect on how they can best foster an environment for gathering constructive feedback. For feedback to be most helpful, those giving feedback need to understand how they should provide and frame the feedback and do so in a way that makes sense to them.

Another consideration when conducting focus groups is to incorporate feedback throughout the process so that collaborators can see their suggestions being implemented. One collaborator mentioned they appreciated seeing their feedback to add brief descriptions of each resource in the modules implemented in the next module. The curriculum developers were finalizing modules one to two weeks ahead of the collaborators. By setting their schedule ahead of the collaborators, the curriculum developers could take the formative feedback and start applying it to the course immediately. When the collaborators witnessed their suggestions being utilized by the curriculum developers, they saw the impact of their feedback, felt trusted, and began to see themselves as true collaborators in the course development process. This trust increased collaborator commitment to the project, and led to high-quality feedback through the duration of the

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

focus groups. To energize and build trust with collaborators, thus garnering better quality feedback, we suggest implementing the formative feedback you receive whenever possible throughout the focus group process.

Disrupting the Narrative of Curriculum Development

Even as the move to online learning has exponentially increased, many still root the curriculum development process in traditional practice. As educational technology continues to advance and learner preferences evolve, course designers should not repeat mistakes of the past. It has become increasingly clear that traditional methods do not always apply to non-traditional spaces such as online, asynchronous courses. This begs the question: how do we shift the curriculum development process to meet the needs of today's learners? In our reflections, one of our most striking findings was how much we worked to disrupt the traditional ways of designing curriculum while remaining student-centered.

Reflections from Our Process

From the beginning of course construction, before the idea of a focus group had even been conceived, the curriculum developers had a mission to create an online asynchronous leadership course unlike others they had seen before. The intent was to engage various learning styles through integrating relevant topics students experience every day, and this required a non-traditional approach and innovation. These manifested in the forms of engaging videos, podcasts, and interactive assignments that allowed for collaboration between students who would never see each other in person for the purposes of this course. As the course design process evolved, the curriculum developers recognized gaps in their knowledge and experiences. In their reflection, the need for more voices became critical. They set out to identify other graduate students to serve as collaborators rather than simply critique the final curriculum product. In preparing for this focus group, the curriculum developers consulted relevant educators and networks, but found very little to model this practice off. What started out as an innovative process led to the realization of how innovative and beneficial using focus groups in curriculum design can be.

Reflecting on the experience, numerous areas of curriculum development were disrupted. The first of these is collaboration. It is no secret many courses, retreats, programs, and numerous other forms of curriculum are developed in silos. In opening the design process to others, we discovered just how vital multiple voices can be. Beatty & Manning-Ouellette (2018) noted in leadership education, dominant voices often guide the conversation, "contributing to the needs and movements of each era; yet we question if and how the field of leadership education represents the lived experiences of all students and the current injustices facing society?" (p. 229). This group worked well because of the recognized need to be intentional about who is brought to the table of both leadership education and curriculum development. Instead of simply checking for errors, this group served as true collaborators, helping properly scaffold, deliver, and facilitate knowledge while thoughtfully considering diverse student perspectives in the instructional design.

The collaborators found themselves implementing the very ideas they try to instill in their students. The curriculum developers, acknowledging their gaps, allowed for them to realize the importance of the developmental perspective. After much time developing the curriculum, it is easy to become complacent and far removed from the students we educate.

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

As one curriculum developer mentioned, the collaboration "brought the energy and helped us recenter and convert. [They] helped us every two weeks recenter on who we're actually making this for." In collaborating with graduate students, the curriculum developers received explicit and ample developmental feedback from those who see students in different spaces than the three curriculum developers.

Considerations for Practice

There are certainly numerous ways to design curriculum and there is no one right or best universal method of curriculum design. Each course requires different skills, ideas, and innovations to make it the best it can be. This course was designed for an asynchronous delivery with the intention of potentially adapting the course to in-person delivery in the future. We recognized starting in the online medium would present unique challenges, such as ensuring student engagement and how to meet students at different levels of their leadership experience. The focus group acknowledge shifting directions of an asynchronous lesson in the moment may prove to be more challenging that adjusting an in-person lecture. Researchers are continually learning more about how instructors can best engage students in online learning, especially in the wake of the pandemics. If students are no longer learning via traditional methods, why then do we insist on creating curriculum utilizing traditional methods?

Keeping this question at the forefront of disrupting the narrative of curriculum development, our primary consideration for practice revolves around the use of collaboration. In the past, curriculum development has often remained siloed, so the calling in of voices other than the curriculum developer is essential when looking to disrupt this narrative. It is important to note that incorporating more voices in this process increases the complexity of the work. However, just because bringing in more voices is more work, the work is still worth doing. Leadership education is just as complex as the diverse learners we teach. As one curriculum developer stated, "we collectively as a group created a product that was significantly better than just going through a curriculum review and saying we're offering a class." Often, the methods of in-person course delivery do not translate well to online delivery, so the methods of online course development need to differ than those of in-person.

The group focused on the collaboration aspect of disruption more than anything else because collaboration often fosters innovative curriculum ideas. As a group, they found more modern content, crafted better questions, and had cleaner scaffolding of knowledge than the course developers would have if each of them individually attempted to create the same course. The group found ways to delivery course content around videos, podcasts, and contemporary issues rather than overwhelming students with the academic reading that we so often fall back on when designing curriculum. The "different" and "innovative" and "non-traditional" ways of engagement with learners emerge through the coming together of multiple voices from multiple backgrounds, experiences, and expertise. This group was an attempt to answer "the call for a shift to more socially just leadership curriculum by leadership educators engaging in liberatory pedagogy" (Beatty & Manning-Ouellette, 2018, p. 230). We recognize using a focus group method is not necessarily a new and never-before-seen idea. However, it is what worked for us, and we saw the impact it made on the course

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

we collectively developed. This was our way of living out what we teach our students every day: call each other in and lift each other up.

Conclusion

Throughout the process of developing this course, it became evident there is a need to disrupt the traditional curriculum creation process and develop a process that calls in diverse voices and experiences. Although our curriculum is grounded on the culturally relevant leadership learning (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016), the implementation of a focus group to aid in the curriculum development process not only included diverse experiences, but also grounded our curriculum with formative feedback from different perspectives. The use of focus groups for curriculum development is multidisciplinary and can be used for various disciplines. This mutually beneficial experience not only allowed the curriculum developers to gain additional insight on course content, but it also allowed collaborators the opportunity to dive into these course concepts and help shape a culturally relevant curriculum for a course focused on contemporary issues surrounding local, national, and global communities.

The use of a focus group was a different way for the course designers to put the pieces of curriculum design and inclusivity together. The result was a more diverse and colorful picture; one rooted in trust, constructive and reliable feedback, and collaboration. We hope to utilize the lessons learned from this process as we construct and review curriculum moving forward. If leadership and education are continuously changing, curriculum developers must be ready to change along with it. This means changing design processes and updating previous curriculum to ensure our students receive the best experience possible. While this may be more work, the work is still worth doing.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest.

Funding

The authors had no funding for this study.

Human Participants

All participants are the researchers of the present study and necessary ethical guidelines are observed.

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

References

Beatty, C. C., & Manning-Ouellette, A. (2018). The role of liberatory pedagogy in socially just leadership education. In K. L. Guthrie & V. S. Chunoo (Eds.), *Changing the narrative: Socially just leadership education* (pp. 229-243). Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Bertrand Jones, T., Guthrie, K. L., & Osteen, L. (2016). Critical domains of culturally relevant leadership learning: A call to transform leadership programs. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, *2016*(152), 9-21. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20205

Blankenberger, B., & Williams, A. M. (2020). COVID and the impact on higher education: The essential role of integrity and accountability. *Administrative Theory & Praxis, 42*(3), 404- 423. https://doi.org/10.1080/10841806.2020.1771907

Briggs, C. L. (2007). Curriculum collaboration: A key to continuous program renewal. *The Journal of Higher Education*, *78*(6), 676-711. https://doi.org/10.1353/jhe.2007.0036

Chunoo, V. S., Beatty, C. C., & Gruver, M. D. (2019). Leadership educator as social justice educator. *New Directions for Student Leadership, 2019*(164), 87-103. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20360

Crowley, C., Chen, H., & Cerver, M. G. (2018). A team-based collaboration used for the development of transnational online distance education courses. *International Journal of E-Learning & Distance Education*, *33*(2), 1-22. https://www.ijede.ca/index.php/jde/article/view/1044

Delbert, T. M., & Jacobs, K. (2021). Best practices in leadership curriculum development: A case study of a curriculum designed to foster authentic leadership skills in graduate students. *Journal of Higher Education Theory & Practice*, *21*(2), 166-183. https://doi.org/10.33423/jhetp.v21i2.4126

Dracup, M., Austin, J. E., & King, T. J. (2020). Applying cultural-historical activity theory to understand the development of inclusive curriculum practices in higher education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *24*(8), 882-900. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2018.1492638

Dugan, J. P. (2017). *Leadership theory: Cultivating critical perspectives.* Jossey-Bass.

Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative science quarterly*, *44*(2), 350-383. https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999

Freire, P. (2000). *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary ed.). Continuum.

Guthrie, K. L., & Bovio, B. (2014). Undergraduate certificate in leadership studies: An opportunity for seamless learning. *Journal of College and Character, 15*(1), 25-32. https://doi.org/10.1515/jcc-2014-0004

Guthrie, K. L., & Jenkins, D. M. (2018). *The role of leadership educators: Transforming learning*. Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Guthrie, K. L., & Priest, K. L. (2022). *Navigating complexities in leadership: Moving towards critical hope*. Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Guthrie, K. L., Beatty, C. C., & Wiborg, E. R. (2021). *Engaging in the leadership process: Identity, capacity, and efficacy for college students*. Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Jenkins, D. M. (2019). Exploring the lived experiences of becoming and being a leadership educator: A phenomenological inquiry. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *18*(3), 141-157. https://journalofleadershiped.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/18_3_Jenkins.pdf

Jones, S. R. (2016). Authenticity in leadership: Intersectionality of identities. *New Directions for Student Leadership, 2016*(152), 23-34. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20206

Komives, S. R., Dugan, J. P., Owen, J. E., Slack, C., Wagner, W., & Associates. (2011). *The handbook for student leadership development* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

Komives, S. R., Longerbeam, S. D., Owen, J. E., Mainella, F. C., & Osteen, L. (2006). A leadership identity development model: Applications from a grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development*, *47*(4), 401-418. https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2006.0048

Ladson-Billings, G. (1995). But that's just good teaching! The case for culturally relevant pedagogy. *Theory into Practice, 34*(3), 159-165. https://doi.org/10.1080/00405849509543675

Lewis, E. (2021). Best practices for improving the quality of the online course design and learners experience. *The Journal of Continuing Higher Education*, *69*(1), 61-70. https://doi.org/10.1080/07377363.2020.1776558

Mahoney, A. D. (2016). Culturally responsive integrative learning environments: A critical displacement approach. *New Directions for Student Leadership, 2016*(152), 47-59. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20208

Moore, M. G. (1989). Editorial: Three types of interaction. *American Journal of Distance Education, 3*(2), 1-7. https://doi.org/10.1080/08923648909526659

Moreno, R., & Mayer, R. (2007). Interactive multimodal learning environments. *Educational Psychology Review*, *19*(3), 309-326. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-007-9047-2

Owen, J. E., Bitton, A., Hassell-Goodman, S., Reynolds, D. J., & Yamanaka, A. (2020, March 3). *We're the leaders we've been waiting for: Women and leadership* [Educational Session]. ACPA Annual Convention, Nashville, TN.

Parks, S. D. (2005). *Leadership can be taught. A bold approach for a complex world.* Harvard Business Review Press.

Pierre, D., Dunn, A. L., Barnes, A. C., Moore, L. L., Seemiller, C., Jenkins, D. M., Priest, K. L., Guthrie, K. L., Beatty, C. C., Bitton, A. L., Duran, A., Bailey, K. J., & Odom, S. F. (2020). A critical look at leadership educator preparation: Developing an intentional and diverse approach to leadership learning and development: Priority 4 of the National Leadership Education Research Agenda 2020-2025. *Journal of Leadership Studies, 14*(3), 56-62. https://doi.org/10.1002/jls.21712

Priest, K. L., & Jenkins, D. M. (2019). Developing a vision of leadership educator professional practice. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, *2019*(164), 9-22. https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20355

Seemiller, C., & Priest, K. L. (2015). The hidden "who" in leadership education: Conceptualizing leadership educator professional identity development. *Journal of Leadership Education*, *14*(3), 132-151. https://doi.org/10.12806/v14/i3/t2

Shaver, D. (2017). The added value of conducting learning design meeting to the online course development process. *TechTrends*, *61*(5), 438-443. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-017-0205-1

Tainsh, Y. I. (2007). The purpose of focus groups in ascertaining learner satisfaction with a virtual learning environment. *The Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, *5*(2), 157-164. https://academic-publishing.org/index.php/ejel/article/view/1512/1475

Volpe White, J. M., Guthrie, K. L., & Torres, M. (2019). *Thinking to transform: Reflection in leadership learning.* Information Age Publishing, Inc.

Yusop, F. D., & Correia, A. P. (2012). The civic-minded instructional designers framework: An alternative approach to contemporary instructional designers' education in higher education. *British Journal of Educational Technology, 43*(2), 180-190. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2011.01185.x

Yusop, F. D., & Correia, A. P. (2014). On becoming a civic-minded instructional designer: An ethnographic study of an instructional design experience. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, *45*(5), 782-792. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12112

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

Ms. Brittany Devies (she/her) is a Ph.D. candidate at Florida State University studying higher education. Brittany is a graduate assistant for the Leadership Learning Research Center, where she works on research and scholarship around collegiate leadership learning. She is a lead instructor for the Undergraduate Leadership Studies Certificate. Her research interests include the intersections of gender and leader identity, capacity, and efficacy development, and culturally relevant leadership learning. In 2020, she was awarded NASPA-FL's Graduate Student of the Year Award and ACPA's Annuit Coeptis Emerging Professional Award. In 2022, she was named by NASPA as the Outstanding Graduate Student in Region III. She was also named a 33 under 33 featured alumnus by Delta Delta Delta National Fraternity. She received her M.S. (Higher Education) from Florida State University and her B.S.Ed. in Early and Middle Childhood Studies with a minor in Leadership Studies from The Ohio State University.

Ms. Emily Ostermeyer is a senior instructional designer and has worked in e-learning and training and development for the past five years. Her work includes designing online, asynchronous learning experiences for a global audience of learners on the topics of leadership development and business education. In the past, she has also served as an instructor at Arizona State University in the Department of Educational Studies Online and at Florida State University in the Undergraduate Certificate in Leadership Studies program. She received her M.Ed from the Harvard Graduate School of Education and a Bachelor's degree in English and Psychology from Florida State University.

Mr. Mark Ross Allbritton (he/him) received his M.S. in Higher Education from Florida State University in 2021. He was a graduate assistant in the Department of Fraternity and Sorority Life and an intern in the Leadership Learning Research Center where he focused on the intersectionality of communication, leadership, masculinity, and mental health. After graduating, he took the skills he learned to the Walt Disney World Resort where he now serves in the front office of 3 deluxe resorts. While he may have stepped out of the field of higher education, he now implements the same leadership concepts within the Disney lenses of safety, courtesy, inclusion, show, and efficiency. He received his B.A. in Organizational Communication with a minor in Sociology from the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

Mr. Derrick Raphael Pacheco (he/him/his/el) is a second-year Ph.D. student in the Higher Education Program at Florida State University. Derrick is a graduate assistant in the Leadership Learning Research Center where he is a lead instructor for the Undergraduate Certificate in Leadership Studies and aids in the management of the certificate. His research interests examine the experiences of Latinx college students and their leadership identity, capacity, and efficacy. Derrick is also interested in culturally relevant and socially just leadership learning, LGBTQIA+ identity development, first-generation student support, and cultural motivators that lead to student success. Derrick also facilitates programs for various Greek-lettered organizations surrounding Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Human Dignity, and Mental Health. He received a B.S. in Management, a B.S. in Marketing, and a M.S. in Higher Education all from Florida State University and holds a Certified Non-Profit Professional (C.N.P.) credential from the National Leadership Alliance.

Mr. Connor Dizor (he/him) is a Resident Director at Tulane University in New Orleans, LA. Connor works with a residential curriculum that fosters wellness, academic success, and leadership growth. In this role, Connor also advises a community government student leadership group and incorporates leadership learning and development into his advising style. Connor's research and practitioner interests include student religious, secular, and spiritual identity development, moral and ethical development, and the intersection with leadership learning and practice. Connor received his M.S. (Higher Education) from Florida State University and his B.A. in Religious Studies with a minor in Psychology from Louisiana State University.

Ms. Kara Jane Henry (she/her) is a Resident Director at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. Kara Jane has held multiple leadership positions in higher education, including advisorships, supervisory positions, and leadership based internships that prioritize the leadership growth and development in college students. In 2020, Kara Jane received Florida State University College of Education's Sherrill W. Ragans Leadership & Service Award. She was also inducted as a Hardee Center for Leadership & Ethics in Higher Education Fellow

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

in 2020. Kara Jane received her M.S. (Higher Education) from Florida State University and her B.S. in Mathematics with a minor in Economics from Troy University.

Mr. Allen Clay Jr. (he/him) is a Community Coordinator at George Washington University where he oversees building operations, occupancy management, transitions, community development, and student conduct within the residence halls. He also advises three student organizations and supervises student staff members within the residential community. Allen also served on a student conduct code revision committee, an alternative resolution focus group, and participated in a case management discussion series at George Washington University. In 2022, he received the Outstanding New Professional Award through the Coalition for Multicultural Affairs within the American College Personnel Association (ACPA). He also earned his M.S. in Higher Education from Florida State University and his B.A. in Hispanic Studies from Davidson College.

[Downloaded from johepal.com on 2026-10-08]

[DOI: 10.52547/johepal.3.2.103]

This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) which allows reusers to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon the material in any medium or format for noncommercial purposes only, and only so long as attribution is given to the creator.