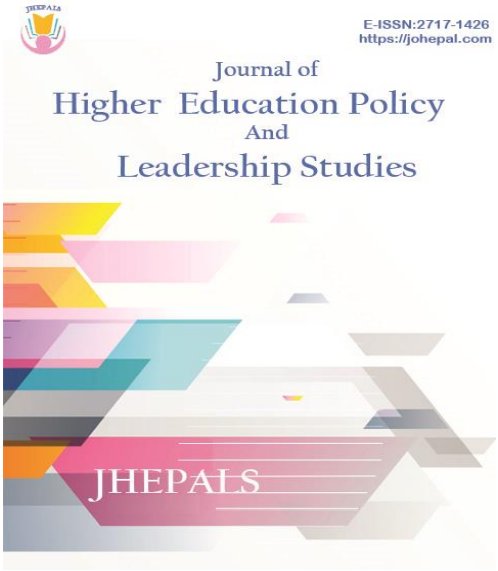
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Exploring the Influences of a Leadership Certificate on Career Readiness



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Abstract

Embracing student engagement through leadership learning in higher education and focusing on identified competencies prepares students for future careers. This study explored the influence of leadership certificate participation on workforce preparedness by specifically investigating, "In which ways do leadership certificate alumni attribute progress toward their academic and career goals to their participation in their certificate?" This qualitative study used semi-structure interviews to get a better sense of learning outcomes of an academic leadership certificate program. Two major findings emerged from participant responses to how the certificate program informed their employment reparation. These two findings include inspiring creativity in themselves and others, as well as setting personal and professional priorities.

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Keywords: Leadership; Learning; Career Readiness; Higher Education; Learning Environment

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Leadership Learning and Career Readiness

Career readiness of college graduates is a valuable outcome of higher education with implications for the overall labor market, civic engagement, and personal wellbeing. In fact, there is a call for accountability, return on investment, and measured outcomes in higher education (National Association of Colleges and Employers [NACE], 2015a). For example, the US-based Complete College America is a nonprofit organization working to significantly increase the number of Americans with high-quality career certificates or college degrees. Globally, employers are concerned with recent graduates' ability and capacity to perform effectively. It is increasingly clear institutions of higher education must produce individuals who retain a depth of information and are able to solve critical problems. Leadership learning in higher education that embraces student engagement and focuses on identified competencies most effectively prepares students for future careers and broader societal impact. Our study explored the influence of leadership certificate participation on workforce preparedness by specifically investigating, "In which ways do leadership certificate alumni attribute progress toward their academic and career goals to their participation in their certificate?"

Historically identified as an outcome of the collegiate experience, leadership development has roots in the founding of American higher education. Today, cultivating leadership occurs in curricular, co-curricular, and community settings. Using Guthrie and Jenkins' (2018) leadership learning framework, we believe leadership learning includes aspects of knowledge, training observation, engagement, development, and metacognition. These six areas evolved from Roberts and Ullom's (1989) training, education, and development model, with the addition of engagement in more recent years (Guthrie & Osteen, 2012). Guthrie and Jenkins (2018) used the metaphor of a steering wheel for the leadership learning framework, in which educators provide a means for students to steer their own learning, as well as better understand the various ways student learn to lead.

One aspect of such learning is leadership knowledge, which encompasses the entire metaphorical steering wheel because it is foundational for all leadership learning and happens by sharing specific language about leadership, as well as new theories, concepts, and constructs. Around the rim of the framework, development, training, observation, and engagement all contribute to metacognition. The human and intrapersonal aspects of leadership learning is leadership development, which can focus on personal needs (Maslow, 1970), readiness to lead (Avolio & Hannah, 2008), identity (Beatty & Guthrie, 2021; Komvies et al., 2005), leadership capacity and efficacy (Bertrand Jones et al., 2016; Beatty & Guthrie, 2021) and multiple dimensions of self (Jones, 2016). The leadership training aspect focuses on skill and competency-based leadership learning (Seemiller, 2013), which is most often used in programs created for leaders holding specific roles (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). Leadership observation refers to the observational aspects of leadership learning (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018), where the learner passively makes meaning from watching. Like leadership observation, leadership engagement is based on the learner's experience. However; in engagement, the learner is an active participant. As Allen and Shehane (2016) explained, the purpose of leadership engagement is, "…to provide the learner with new experiences, and the role of the educator is often to help individuals capture and make sense of planned or naturalistic experiences (constructivism) following an activity" (p. 44). Metacognition is the

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final aspect of leadership learning and refers to the mindfulness of one's knowledge and the ability to recognize, control, and use one's intellectual processes (Meichenbaum, 1985). Taken together, the leadership learning provides a context for constant discovery through the interaction between theory and practice (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Roberts, 2007). Understanding how these varied elements shape the post-college work experience and prepare students for employment supports the continued investment in leadership learning at the collegiate level.

T-shaped Individuals

Considering the six areas of leadership learning identified by Guthrie and Jenkins (2018), an argument can be made that students engaged in leadership studies develop as "T-shaped individuals"; those with a deep knowledge in one or two specialized areas or disciplines, crossed by a broad set of complementary skills such as communication, creativity, cultural awareness, empathy, critical thinking, and the capacity to apply knowledge to produce creative solutions (Brooks, 2012). Valenti (2015) represented T-shaped professionals (Figure 1) as desirable by employers, which evolved from Leonard- Barton's (1995) work of "T-shaped skills" needed in any situation where problem-solving across functional areas is necessary.

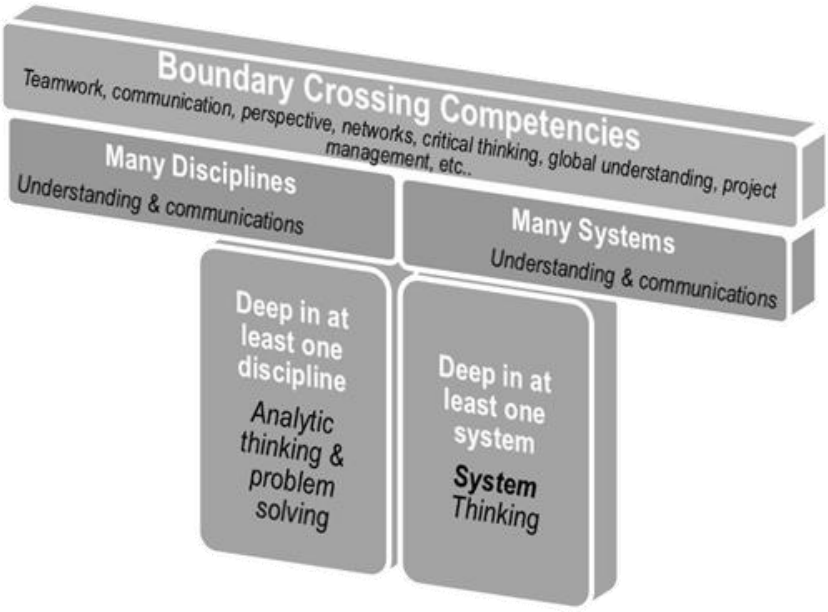


Figure 1. T-shaped professional (Adapted from Valenti, 2015)

Career Readiness

Many modern occupational environments have shifted from hierarchical structures to atmospheres of collaboration and individual autonomy. In 2010, then-U.S. Secretary of Education, Duncan identified leadership studies programs as uniquely situated to bolster the communication, problem-solving, and creative capacities of college students. Furthermore, Van Velsor and Wright (2012) identified adaptability, effective communication, learning

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ability, and multicultural awareness as essential competencies for future leaders; many of which are core outcomes of modern leadership studies programs. NACE (2015b) reported more than 80% of employers seek candidates who demonstrate both leadership ability and teamwork skills on their resumes. Defined by NACE (2015a), career readiness is, "…the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace" (para. 3). The specific competencies identified by NACE (2015a) include critical thinking/problem solving, or more specifically the ability to, "…exercise sound reasoning to analyze issues, make decisions, and overcome problems. The individual is able to obtain, interpret, and use knowledge, facts, and data in this process, and may demonstrate originality and inventiveness." (para. 4).

Smith et al. (2018) explored the relationships between leadership development experiences and competencies within higher education, focusing on how those college activities impacted post graduation success. The Center for Educational Research and Innovation (CERI) annually collects data on essential skills employers seek in new hires. Consistently identified characteristics include: managing time and priorities, contributing to a team, embracing change, solving problems, balancing work and life, and navigating across boundaries. Preparing students in these areas assists their readiness to enter the workforce and long-term success as the future of work evolves; continually requiring employees to be adaptable and life-long learners (Fidler, 2016) who are able to negotiate boundaries as the lines between work and life blur and employees operate outside of physical workspaces. Fidler (2016) identified increased automation, shifts in the culture of work, and emerging organizational models as drivers of the evolution in the way work is accomplished. The intersection and intersection of engagement, leadership education, and career education as an imperative and strategic goal of higher education is critical to consider.

Study Context: Leadership Certificate

The undergraduate leadership certificate under examination in this study is an 18-credit hour interdisciplinary program intending to prepare students for leadership in diverse environments. The program uses a theory-to-practice orientation, involving experiential learning, specifically including service-learning projects to frame leadership learning within the context of social change. The certificate is based on an integrative learning model where students engage in learning in- and out-of-the-classroom, predicated on a foundation of community building, knowledge-sharing, and reflection (Guthrie & Bovio, 2014). The undergraduates enrolled in the certificate at the time of study were diverse regarding gender, age, background, major of study, year in school, race/ethnicity. Due to its interdisciplinary nature, it draws students from various majors and career fields. Established learning outcomes allow for the development of students' leadership capacity while encouraging application for future career pathways. The certificate program includes four major learning outcomes that guide curriculum: 1) gaining theoretical knowledge of leadership theory; 2) increasing self-awareness through personal reflection; 3) increasing leadership skill development; and, 4) the ability to apply theory-to-practice in multiple contexts. By participating in the program, students gain knowledge and skills impacting their leadership as an individual, in partnerships, and in their post-college environments.

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Research Methodology

This study was qualitative in nature, leveraging the strengths of semi-structured personal interviews. Specifically, this methodology allowed the researchers to respond to information provided by participants in order to more deeply understand the perspectives of their narratives, and to incorporate ideas as they emerged both within and between interviews (Merriam, 2009). Participants were recruited using enrollment information maintained by the focal leadership certificate program. Only individuals who had completed all certificate requirements, and had earned undergraduate degrees, were included in the study. Initial recruitment included 53 potential sample members were contacted. Of the 23 members of the final sample, 18 were female, and all had graduated with the leadership certificate.

The interview protocol was constructed taking into consideration foundational theories of the certificate, as well as its stated learning objectives. Interviews were conducted in-person, over the phone, and via remote audio/video technologies. Interviews with the 23 participants lasted between 20 and 113 minutes, depending on how much the participant was willing and able to share. The principal investigator, three doctoral students, and one full-time student affairs administrator conducted these interviews. All interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded through NVIVO, using open, axial, and selective coding procedures in accordance with the recommendations of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014) and in conjunction with a constant comparative method (Glaser, 1965) among investigators.

Findings

Participants discussed two major ways completing the Leadership Certificate informed their employment preparation and performance after college: inspiring creativity in themselves and others, and setting personal and professional priorities. Accounts of creative inspiration included descriptions of general conditions that aided or hindered creativity, as well as specific examples of inspiring creativity in others, and instances of working through resistance when expressing creativity in a variety of social settings. Discussions on the process of prioritization included references to the relative worth of various activities, the strategies participants employed to organize responsibilities and activities, and the outcomes associated with their preferred organizational styles. These themes are discussed further in the following sections.

Inspiring Creativity

Identification of two social conditions emerged from participant responses regarding creativity: *being given autonomy at work* and the *impact of creative conversations*. James, a previous secondary education major, reflected on what he had learned about his work style through the leadership certificate: “I'm not good at doing the sustaining thing. I'm an innovator. I can probably continue the work that other people are doing, but I'm at my best whenever I get to create new things and challenge the process…” In addition to creative time, space, and freedom, participants extolled the virtue of creative conversations. Almost every respondent included some version of needing the input and feedback of others to be successful in their occupational lives. Ivan, summarized the notions of many alumni by reporting:

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> …[D]iscussion I think is a very important part of fostering creativity. And there's a certain disposition …to constructive, creative conversations. There's a sense of ownership that comes with an idea …but I think the most constructive conversations are when people are able to abandon that sense of ownership and not let alterations…be personal attacks and …just supplements shaping the idea. …I think it …[requires]…creating that open and welcoming environment where it's clear that everyone who's participating is on equal footing and is not being judged…

The type of critical yet constructive discussions described here are exactly the kind that are actively fostered within (and in some cases, between) courses within the leadership certificate under examination. In classes, students are encouraged to dialogue about their emerging and established ideas around leadership and leader identities; many of which mirror the tensions between owning an idea and developing flexible thinking. Certificate alumni also demonstrated deep introspection regarding the challenges to their own creativity. Tina described her internal dialogue when her creativity was stunted:

> So for me, it's recognizing the times when I'm not on board, why am I not on board? How can I get on board and how can I get involved so that I can bring good ideas to the table? In a time of change I think it's often opportunity for collaboration and for creativity.

Tina's account reflected internal challenges to creativity, including lack of motivation and opportunity. She identified times of transition as opportune for innovation and creativity. From this and other similar accounts, it became apparent challenges to creativity stemmed from both internal dissonance and external conditions; including a relative dearth of opportunities to express creativity.

Setting Priorities

Certificate alumni also commented on the role of prioritization in their work and at home. These discussions included references to specific organizational mechanisms and outcomes associated with their preferred approaches. They talked about priorities in their occupational lives as stemming from personal mission statements, while an internal sense of right and wrong seemed to guide their personal lives. When asked how he set priorities, Ivan talked about the helpfulness of personal and professional mission statements as allowing him to define his core values in each role and giving him a way to communicate what was personally and professionally important. He also talked about how helpful priorities were in setting boundaries between personal and professional life; a core element of his post-college success.

After graduating college, Elyse spent a year studying international development abroad and six months working for a Washington D.C.-based non-governmental organization, all before serving as a volunteer for over two years in southern Africa. Reflecting on her experience in South Africa, she detailed how difficult maintaining her priorities were when there was no separation between her private and occupational lives:

> Working with my host organization and staying with my host family was an interesting situation because there wasn't a lot of divide because my host

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> parents were my primary counterpart and supervisor…Before my Peace Corps experience, I wasn't as aware of how important it was for me to have a balance between work and personal life. But because it was a situation where there was no divide and there was no opportunity to have as much of a balance as I would have wanted, it became more aware to me.

Her Peace Corps experience had a profound impact on Elyse, both in terms of her budding sense of priorities, and as a part of the leadership learning she had started in the certificate. Resulting from these experiences, she developed the insight and language necessary to communicate the value she places on both her personal time and putting forth maximum effort in her working life. Relationships with her family, friends, and community have also become personal priorities, along with her physical health and mental wellbeing.

Discussion and Implications

Within the lives of the alumni who participated in this study, freedom, leveraging the power of critical conversations, and setting priorities all contributed to their ability to be creative and inspire creativity in others. Additionally, by role modeling core elements of their college leadership learning experiences, including their own personal introspection, they were able to inspire creativity. Furthermore, this introspection led to deeper appreciation among our respondents of their own values, as well as their own internal senses of right and wrong. Both of these factors seemed to contribute to their ability to set and maintain priorities in their personal and professional lives; one of the desired characteristics employers seek in new hires. The values clarification that came from introspection and reflection among our participants also fueled their motivation to be successful.

All these elements have their roots in leadership learning, as evidenced by this study of a curricular-based leadership certificate. Some may argue creativity, motivation, and prioritization cannot be taught; however, we believe that by creating environments where people can practice each of these allows them to find their most authentic ways of expressing creativity, enacting motivation, and living a priority-driven life. We believe these are the kinds of environments all leadership learning initiatives should strive to create.

For many college-minded individuals, and their families, preparation for the workforce is a primary concern when deciding *if* and *where* to attend. Given the increased scrutiny all higher education faces regarding the post-college success of their students, curricular and co-curricular leadership development programs are uniquely positioned within the academy to demonstrate the value of postsecondary education. The present study, and its qualitative focus, provided one example of how other programs of leadership education can pursue illustrating what they already know: leadership learners are equipped for the labor market in profound and meaningful ways. Leadership learning, specifically the experience offered in our focal leadership certificate, crosses the "T" for students. Just as Brooks (2012) suggested, students in one or two specialized areas crossed by a broad set of complementary skills are able to produce creative solutions. We implore other leadership educators to study their own alumni, so collectively we can all better prepare our students for the leadership challenges of the future.

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