

Leadership Academic Program Development in North America: Theoretical and Contextual Challenges

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Abstract

The development of a new academic field of study is always met with resistance and other challenges including the need to carve a space for the program in addition to defining and designing a curriculum that is unique and different from existing traditional academic programs. The research and dialogue about leadership academic education contribute to a rich debate about program design, content, curriculum and positioning. This paper explores the different levels of the theoretical debate about the best approaches to provide leadership education in colleges and universities in North America. Although the area of program curriculum design still lacks harmonization, areas of agreement have emerged over the years.

Keywords: *Leadership Education, Curriculum Design, Program Development.*

1. Introduction

The number of leadership education programs has increased substantially in North American colleges and universities over the past few decades. With this rapid increase, we are witnessing an important debate to identify a relevant space for this new field of study in an already crowded academic environment. Unlike many traditional disciplines, leadership educators are faced with a challenge of articulating a program model that will respond to the desire to teach leadership but to also help students develop their leadership potential. Within this context of growth, the need for research exploring the various strategies to develop and differentiate leadership education from other fields of study has never been greater.

The rapid development of leadership education is supported by an increased demand for leadership in all sectors. As suggested by Eich (2008, p. 176), “our nation (the US) is in a leadership crisis, one that requires more and better leadership in all areas of our society”. In Canada, the Conference Board (2008) suggested that we don’t need more MBA’s but more leaders. This trend will continue because of the high demand for leadership skills in our organizations. This growth has also forced leadership educators to not only reflect on the objectives and outcomes of their programs but to also explore how to position leadership education as a recognized new field of study.

This process has contributed over the past years in attempting to clarify and build the foundations for leadership academic programs. Research in this area also shows that there is a need to further reflect on harmonizing program design. This clarification of a foundation for such programs is essential because it helps students understand the types of skills, competences and expertise they will acquire throughout their educational journeys. It also helps employers to know the specific competences students graduating with a leadership degree may have and how they will contribute to their organizations.

2. Research purpose and context

Middlebrooks and Allen (2008) state that in any discipline, the success and recognition of the field must begin by addressing the following foundational questions of teaching and learning: “a. theoretical framework (what big picture assumptions and objectives inform the program?); b. curriculum (what content should we teach?); c. instruction (how should that content be taught?); d. influences (what influences our teaching and the student’s learning?); e. and assessment (how do we know if learning occurs?” (p. 78). While most of these questions are essential to the positioning of any program, those regarding the curriculum are central to any design.

As a founding member of the first undergraduate leadership program in Ontario (Canada), my colleagues and I have been very interested and involved in program development and designs over the past years, and have conducted several research projects related to how to develop and position our program within our institution. This experience led to several challenges related to institutional recognition, student recruitment, program design and identity.

In this paper an overview of the literature and debates regarding the development of leadership education in North America will be presented. An analysis and synthesis of the results of research my colleagues and I have completed over the past years to explore the emerging design models of leadership programs in North America will be highlighted.

3. Methodology

The methodology for this paper consists of reviewing the literature by presenting the major debates about the development of leadership education, and by summarizing the findings of three major research projects. A research project conducted in 2013 and 2016 using the Curricular Matrix model developed by Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt and Arensdorf (2006) was used to study emerging curriculum design of leadership programs. This study by Brungardt et al. (2006) compared the leadership major programs from 15 universities in the United States through the examination of their academic curricula. They used a Curriculum Matrix in which all courses were classified under six different topic areas: Theory/History; Skills/Behaviors; Context; Issues; Internships, and Support. This model was used in two of our studies to identify similarities and differences between leadership programs.

In 2013, my colleagues and I conducted a qualitative research project to evaluate our own experiences of developing the first undergraduate leadership program in Ontario Canada. This study examines the ways in which competing discourses impact the sustainability of an undergraduate leadership program (McLaren, McGowan, Gerhardt, Diallo, and Saeed, 2013). Interviews and self-reflection were used to capture the context and the territorial conflict during program development. This also contributed to a reflection on the positioning of our program in the institution

In 2013, my colleague Dr. Gerhardt and I analyzed the curricular design of 26 undergraduate ‘Organizational Leadership’ programs using the framework developed by Brungardt to identify similarities and differences between programs (Gerhardt and Diallo, 2013). In 2016, we conducted another study analyzing the curricular design of 52 institutions offering a Minor in Leadership (13 institutions) or a Minor in Leadership Studies (30 institutions) in the United States using again the Brungardt et al. template to try

to identify if there is a core curricular emerging from leadership education programs (Diallo and Gerhardt, 2017). These two research projects surveyed the list of programs provided by the International Leadership Association (ILA) website. The data was collected from the program websites and using the list of required courses offered by each program. This research was motivated by our desire to adapt our own undergraduate leadership program created in 2004 to the emerging models.

This paper will provide a literature review of the different levels of debates and will also synthesize the core findings of our research in curriculum design and highlight several challenges that the field of leadership education still needs to address.

4. Overview of the Debate in the Development of Leadership Education

4.1. Growth of leadership education

The growth of leadership education is founded in the change of paradigm of our perception of leaders and leadership. While leaders may have innate qualities that may help enhance their leadership, it is clear that most of what leaders do can be learned and taught. Posner (2009) argues, “the notion that leadership is magical and reserved to a few inhibits the development of more leaders” (p.1). He adds that it is not the absence of leadership potential that inhibits the development of more leaders; it is the persistence of the myth that leadership can’t be taught.

The development of leadership education can also be linked to the growth of an important body of literature, research, theories and academic journals in the area of leadership (Riggio 2013). Some associate leadership education and liberal arts education (Wren, Riggio, & Genovese, 2009). Others promote the link between leadership education and business programs (Sowcik and Allen, 2013). Despite the desire of appropriation of leadership education by different academic programs, leadership education is carving its own space as a different and specific field of studies built from an interdisciplinary approach.

4.2. How to teach leadership

The question about how leadership should be taught has also been central to the development of leadership academic programs. A review of the literature on teaching methodology in leadership points to a plethora of ways to deliver information and develop student’s leadership skills (Bridgforth, 2005). According to Posner (2009), there is a problem with how many schools teach leadership. He argues that many inconsistencies regarding the focus, objectives, designs, and theories versus skills development has been noted by different researchers.

Seger (2013) suggests “that leadership skills are best learned by teaching through leadership, not about leadership, thus helping students to develop their leadership” (p. 253). Allio (2005) notes that programs tend to promote leadership literacy but not leadership competences. Posner (2009) believes that teaching leadership requires more than theories but doing, and he suggests using “action-learning” (or learning on the job). A study by Jenkins (2012) finds that “class discussion” –whether in form of true discussion or a hybrid of interactive lecture and discussion, and group and individual projects and presentations - are the signature pedagogy for undergraduate leadership education. It is also recognized throughout the literature that leadership education is constructed around experiential learning opportunities (Anselmi & Frankel, 2004).

4.3. Nature of leadership education

Today there is an agreement from leadership educators that leadership education is multidisciplinary. Sowcik (2012) defines leadership as “an interdisciplinary, academic, and applied field of study that focuses on the fluid process and components of the interaction between leaders and followers in a particular context” (p. 4). Leadership programs are designed by integrating several disciplines to create an approach to education that is unique. Middlebrooks and Allen (2009, p. x) note that “leadership scholars draw from anthropology, philosophy, psychology, sociology, communication, political science, business, education, public policy, and the growing fields of their own foundational work in leadership theory and research”.

The multidisciplinary nature of leadership education is also demonstrated by our research. Using the Curriculum Matrix developed by Brungardt and al. (2006), our own research results demonstrate how leadership programs include courses from several other disciplines including communication studies, organizational studies, experiential learning, and leadership-based courses.

4.4. Territorial conflict

Although the development of leadership education in universities and colleges continues to grow, where those leadership programs belong within the university is often an issue. Pennington (2005) notes that the evidence of the expansion of leadership coursework across courses and majors contributes to the emergence of some forms territorialism. In our own experience, our leadership program, which was designed as an undergraduate Honours BA in Leadership and offered since 2004 ended up being suspended because of a long territorial conflict with our business program. The compromise led to a redesign of the program from an Honours BA to a Minor in Leadership in 2013.

The core of the conflict was due to the belief by our business colleagues that many of our leadership courses were business courses. Many of our core leadership courses (Leadership Foundations, Organizational Leadership, Interpersonal Communication, Teams and Organizations) were considered to overlap with business courses. The incapacity to find a common ground of understanding led not only to suspending recruitment to the leadership program but forced our leadership team to redesign our program for a greater differentiation. Among problems we faced in this process, we can also highlight the difficulty of clarifying the boundaries of leadership education in a country where leadership education is in its infancy. We can also mention the limited administrative support during this process.

5. Summary of Research Results

5.1. Program curricular designs

The analysis of the curriculum was based on exploring commonalities and differences between leadership programs. Although there is an interest to develop common program benchmarks, many studies found very little consistency in curricular designs from program to program. The different studies from Brungardt and al. (2006), Gerhardt and Diallo (2013) and Diallo and Gerhardt (2017) share specific results. They all confirmed the interdisciplinary nature of leadership education with a multitude of design models. Results also show that there are many different names used by programs, from Organizational Leadership, Leadership, Leadership Studies to combined names (i.e. Leadership and Adult Education, or Global Leadership).

The research also found that programs are offered in both small and large institutions, and that programs are located in many different faculties and departments, from adult studies, professional programs to business schools. In this regard the different studies concluded that there is very little consistency in which department programs are housed. One of our studies reviewed 26 Organizational Leadership programs and found a multitude of home departments for leadership programs (Gerhardt and Diallo, 2013)

Table 1: Proportion of Leadership programs by Home Department/School

Home Department	Proportion	Home Department	Proportion
Business	0.277	Engineering/Tech	0.021
Leadership	0.213	Education	0.021
Professional Studies/Adult	0.138	Community Resources	0.011
Non-designated	0.128	Liberal Arts	0.011
Religious	0.064	Public & Environmental Sci.	0.011
Arts and Sciences	0.053	Agriculture & Natural Resources	0.011
Continuing Education	0.032	Psychology	0.011

Source: Gerhardt and Diallo (2013)

5.2. Curriculum content

Our two research studies in 2013 and 2017 confirmed findings from Brungardt and al. research (2006). All three studies found an important variety of design models. Although there were commonalities in course sequencing, the coverage of the different topic areas provided by Brungardt and al. was not consistent. Some topic areas are highly covered while others are less. This finding was consistent with all three studies. The study of Leadership minors we conducted in 2016 illustrates extreme cases where one can take a full minor in leadership without ever taking a course in communications (Diallo and Gerhardt, 2017). Results also show a stark difference of program focus. The studies found that the designs of the different programs were not impacted by the same scholars in the field.

Another important finding is that the differences in program names are not determining and doesn't mean a difference in program design. For example the study by Gerhardt and Diallo (2013) focused on 28 programs named Organizational Leadership and the results showed that there was a fairly even split between programs offered as a Bachelor of Arts or a Bachelor of Science. The study found no noticeable difference between the two groups.

The different research studies also highlighted interesting mixed results; although program designs were very different and didn't follow a clear pattern, some trends are starting to show. Most of the topic areas are covered with 'theories/history' and 'context' being the most covered topics. Courses under the 'theories/history' topic are the leadership specific content and courses under the 'context' topic provide an area of autonomy, differentiation between programs by specifying the types of organizational context (business, community,

not for profit, or public sector) or cultural, international or regional perspectives of programs learning objectives.

6. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is not to call for a standardization of leadership programs curricular but to encourage the identification and recognition of a core that should be covered by all programs. The identity and recognition of the specificity of leadership education will gain by encouraging more harmonization of curriculum content and design. The field has reached a critical mass that should lead to a process of more consistency in program design.

With the multitude of leadership degree programs that exist, many studies have proposed or analyzed their curricular designs focusing on courses, their contents and their sequencing. In the quest to rationalize leadership curriculum, many approaches have been proposed. Recently, the National Leadership Education Research Agenda (NLERA) has encouraged new research direction for leadership education. The recommendations reiterate clarifying the content-based priorities of leadership education. While diversity in program design is inevitable because of the nature of leadership education, the identity of the field of study will depend on its capacity to better harmonize program designs.

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