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Majoring in Leadership: Issues of Consistency and Credibility

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Abstract

The field of Leadership Studies struggles with issues of consistency and credibility. Based on prior surveys of undergraduate leadership majors, it is evident that the field is not unified. Other multidisciplinary fields of study, which have more defined elements (e.g. Women's Studies and African American Studies), are not burdened with the need to constantly define and/or defend their curriculum. This discussion presents the argument that increasing consistency among programs could lead to increased credibility as a field and a foundation moving leadership degree programs forward.

Overview

What does the study of leadership look like in an academic context? This is a question that has plagued the field of study since it first entered the academic realm in the 1930s and has led to concerns about major credibility. In the past, Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, and Arensdorf (2006), compared and contrasted leadership majors and illustrated significant differences among program structure and content. This work was revisited several years later by Greenleaf, Kastle, Arensdorf, Whitaker, and Sramek (2017) and the findings were similar. Multidisciplinary fields of study similar to Leadership Studies such as Women's Studies, Urban Studies, African American Studies, etc., have made tremendous progress towards identifying core elements (NCBS, 2010). In order to advance undergraduate leadership programs, it is our argument that there needs to be a foundation for shared understanding to increase consistency as well as credibility in the field.

Consistency

If we have learned anything from the prior surveys of undergraduate leadership programs, it is that there is no unification in the field. Major degree programs in leadership studies are scattered throughout various colleges and departments, have a wide range of credit hour requirements, and labeled by many different titles. These differences go beyond simple or surface level differences and imply that the educational experience provided at one college/university may differ drastically from the experience offered at a different college/university. This creates a situation where leadership education is whatever makes sense to the individuals structuring the program. An approach to education like this only fuels the confusion and vagueness surrounding the idea of leadership and prompts questions regarding

purpose and value of a leadership degree. If the field of leadership studies is to see any significant progress, a shared structural foundation must be established.

This foundation would, at some level, take on the form of standardization to try and bring leadership degree programs into alignment. For example, national and international organizations such as the Inter-Association Leadership Education Collaborative, the Association of Leadership Educators, and the International Leadership Association could work collaboratively or individually to define criteria that would outline shared elements of a leadership major program. This would not necessarily prevent individual programs from creating areas of emphasis or topical directions, but it could prescribe core elements that should be included in a degree program in leadership. While the idea of standardization may be unwanted by some leadership educators, it is important to note that the process would not have to take the form of a narrowly and rigidly focused accreditation process. Rather, it could be a shared set of overarching outcomes shared among different programs.

Transitioning to a more structured and unified approach to leadership education would not be without cost. Leadership education is a complex and interdisciplinary process, and it is possible that some level of creativity, innovation, and flexibility could be lost or hindered through a more structured approach. In addition, leadership education is certainly not something that can be whittled down to a short list of key topics or ideas. However, the call for formal program review is not unprecedented (Perruci & McManus, 2013; Goertzen, 2013; Ritch, 2013; Sowcik, Lindsey, & Rosch, 2013) and, if leadership degree programs remain inconsistent, additional concerns arise.

Credibility

Credibility flows from consistency. It is no secret that leadership studies as a multidisciplinary field of study has been fighting for acceptance in academia since its inception. The last twenty years have shown tremendous growth in the depth and breadth of academic programs offered in this field. Brungardt, et al. (2006) identified 15 undergraduate degree programs in the field of leadership studies while the replication study conducted by Greenleaf, et al. (2017) identified 45 programs. It is important to note this growth is only representative of programs that fit the criteria developed by the researchers in these studies and does not articulate the vast number of academic programs that do not meet specific criteria. This growth coupled with business and industry vocalizing the need for education in soft skills for graduates entering the workforce demonstrates broad based acceptance of the field has come a long way (Hirsch, 2017; Robles, 2012). These facts notwithstanding, there is still a considerable distance to be traveled before leadership studies is universally accepted as a major field of study.

As the number of major programs and the demand for leadership increases, it seems difficult to imagine that educators could ethically profess knowledge and understanding of the leadership process if what they profess is significantly different from other leadership experts. It seems equally unlikely that others would accept our claims if they have no consistency among other leadership programs. Therein lies the crux of the credibility issue. If institutions of higher education are to be perceived as the purveyors of leadership knowledge but are unwilling to identify the basic elements of the leadership process, then asking others to accept our assertions about leadership carries little weight.

This issue of credibility is not limited to the external environment. Many leadership major programs struggle with issues of credibility within their college/university as well. Even though the field of leadership studies is relatively young, academically speaking, others will

continue to doubt the credibility of leadership programs until these programs can unite under a common banner. Only then will we be able to move forward collectively and gain credibility from the external and internal communities.

What is it that makes core elements of leadership education so hard to define? Where do other types of programs succeed where leadership studies does not? If a field of study is not consistent does it demonstrate a larger fundamental problem? The list of questions stemming from a perceived lack of credibility in the field could go on exponentially. As stewards of the field leaderships we, as scholars, have a responsibility to continually work to increase the credibility of the field. The exact direction of lines of effort needed in this endeavor may be unclear, but the road is nonetheless one that must continually be traveled.

Conclusions

The purpose of this discussion is to provoke thought regarding where leadership studies is as an academic field of study. What impact can we, as leadership scholars, have in steering perceptions of the field in higher education? What steps could and should be taken to help the field move forward towards acceptance in the academe? Answering these questions will require educators to identify common elements that comprise effective leadership education. If leadership programs continue to operate independently they may fail to remain relevant as our society continues to try and define what leadership is and how it works. If there is no shared agreement about what leadership is then, at some point, we will lose our credibility as experts and our ability to influence others about the process of leadership.

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