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Leadership Practices of Students Enrolled in a Leadership Theories Course

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Abstract

This research investigated the student leadership practices of undergraduates enrolled in a leadership theories course at a large, regional university using Kouzes' and Posner's (1998) *Student Leadership Practices Inventory* (SLPI). Students enrolled in the course scored higher in all five categories of exemplary leadership practices than the SLPI normative data. Furthermore, leadership studies minors scored higher than non-leadership minors in two categories, *inspiring a shared vision* and *enabling others to act*. Results indicate that there are differences in leadership characteristics between students who minor in leadership or take a leadership course as compared to students in leadership roles. It is recommended that as curricular leadership programs continue to grow and expand, these programs take student leadership characteristics into account in course development to create more effective programs to address students' needs.

Leadership Practices of Students Minorng in Leadership Studies

Introduction

Who are the students who engage in curricular leadership programs and courses? What are their leadership characteristics? How do they perceive themselves as leaders? This study attempts to answer these questions with the goal of better understanding the leadership characteristics of students enrolled in a leadership theories course. To this end, self-reported responses using the student inventory from Kouzes and Posner's (2008) *Five Fundamental Practices of Exemplary Leadership* model were examined for students enrolled in a leadership theories course at a large, regional university in Tennessee. This study compares student leadership practices of leadership studies minors with students who are not minors in leadership studies, while also comparing these students' leadership characteristics with normative data.

The leadership theories course provides an examination of prominent theories, approaches, and a research-based understanding of the theoretical construct of leadership. Emphasis is placed on the evolution of leadership theory and contribution of research to the synthesis of historical leadership perspectives into contemporary leadership models. The students minoring in the leadership studies program are part of a 17-credit curriculum with a the leadership theories course as a part of the core requirements. The interdisciplinary curriculum encompasses the psychological, organizational, sociological, business, ethical, and communication elements of leadership. Focusing on the study of leadership from various perspectives, disciplines, and contexts, the curriculum is designed to provide students with learning opportunities to develop their leadership potential with the core courses emphasizing experiential learning, reflection, and synthesis.

Purpose

Having a better understanding of student leadership practices is essential on many levels of student leadership development – from student development to program development. Posner (2004) recommended further study concerning student leadership practices to understand just how leadership is developed and argued that studies investigating just how leadership development occurs would be invaluable.

Academic credit, ranging from a leadership class to a leadership major, has been gaining in popularity in the past 20 years with leadership development as an integral part of many educational programs (Howe & Freeman, 1997; Posner, 2004). However, the literature tends to focus on understanding student leadership characteristics, especially using the *Five Fundamental Practices of Exemplary Leadership* model, from co-curricular experiences (campus leadership roles, conferences, etc.) rather than curricular programs.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, it attempts to gain a better understanding of student leadership practices using Kouzes & Posner's model for students enrolled in a leadership course by comparing them to the SLPI normative data. Secondly, it strives to determine if there are differences in leadership characteristics between students who choose to minor in leadership verses those students taking a leadership course as an elective. Stetch (2008) argued that leadership education, not training or development, is the most academically legitimate in transferring information and knowledge because it results in the ability to compare and contrast theories, models, and perspectives. This study ultimately contributes to the literature in understanding student leadership practices in leadership education programs.

Review of Literature

As a field of study that draws from many academic disciplines, leadership studies interweaves the various elements of leadership into a curriculum. Multiple disciplines support leadership study which can empower students to engage others in making a positive difference in their diverse fields (Colvin, 2003). However, many of the leadership programs designed for college students are based on studies and models that were developed with managers in business and public-sector organizations in mind (Freeman, Knott, & Schwartz, 1994). As a result, serious questions have been raised about whether such models are applicable to college students, which differ considerably from the environments in which managers and businesses operate (Posner, 2004).

One such business model comes from Kouzes and Posner (1988, 2008) who first developed the *Leadership Practices Inventory* (LPI) to provide a conceptual framework for business environments to describe managers' best experiences as leaders. They collected case studies from over 1,200 managers about their personal best experiences as leaders and discovered a pattern of behaviors when leadership was most effective, from both self and observer reports. From these reports, they identified behaviors that they formed into five categories: *challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart* (see Table 1 for descriptions). They later developed the *Student Leadership Practices Inventory* (SLPI) by modifying some items to obtain more accurate information from students by framing questions and statements in applicable terms to investigate whether the leadership behaviors of college students were comparable with those of managers (Brodsky, 1988; Posner, 2004; Posner & Brodsky, 1992).

Table 1

Leadership Practices Category Descriptions (Kouzes & Posner, 1995)

Category	Description
Challenging the Process	searching for opportunities, experimenting/taking risks
Inspiring a Shared Vision	envisioning an uplifting future, enlisting others in a common vision
Enabling Others to Act.	fostering collaboration, strengthening people
Modeling the Way	setting the example, achieving small wins
Encouraging the Heart	recognizing individual contributions, celebrating team accomplishments

Posner's (2004) research findings indicated that college student leaders engaged in the model's same leadership practices and concluded that the *Five Fundamental Practices of Exemplary Leaders* model was relevant to college students' leadership experiences. Arendt (2004) followed a similar process for validating the appropriateness of the personal best leadership case study methodology and SLPI for use with college students. In other words, the practices identified for successful business leaders correspond with successful practices for college students and that students who used all five leadership practices tended to be the most effective (Posner, 2004).

However, most of the research investigating Kouzes and Posner's model for exemplary leadership with students focuses on leadership in co-curricular programs and roles (e.g. student leaders in organizations, resident assistants, orientation assistants, leadership conferences) indicating that the SLPI is most commonly used in studying students engaged in leadership co-curricular programs or training (e.g, Adams & Keim, 2000; Braue, 2008; Kelley, 2006; Kouzes & Posner, 1998; Posner, 2004; Ricketts & Priest, 2007). Only a handful studies have examined

student leadership practices in curricular programs, yet these studies did not focus on leadership programs in particular. Instead, these studies focused on ROTC, dietary programs, internships, and graduate programs (Braue, 2008; Dowd, 2006; Scribner, 2005; Walker, 2001). In the studies that examined student leadership practices in leadership courses, the foci of the research varied. One study concluded that students who were compensated through course credit or money for their leadership responsibilities did not engage in different leadership practices/patterns of behavior (Endress, 2000). In another study more closely tied to this research, findings indicated that completion of a leadership course enhanced students' beliefs in their abilities to engage in leadership behaviors, independent of students' levels of co-curricular involvement (Kouzes and Posner, 1998). Demographic variables (including gender, ethnicity, year in school, age, GPA, and academic major) have been found to be unrelated to student leadership practices (Posner, 2004).

In summary, while the SLPI has been a popular tool in measuring student leadership practices, most of the research focuses on the use of this tool in co-curricular leadership environment. Very little attention has been paid to the use of the SLPI to better understand student leadership practices when they are enrolled in a curricular leadership program. That is, most of the literature deals with understanding students' leadership practices in the realm of co-curricular programs rather than curricular programs. This study attempts to begin to remedy this gap in the literature.

Methodology

This research examines the leadership practices, as defined by Kouzes and Posner (2008), of students enrolled in a leadership theories course at a large, region university in Tennessee.

Participants consisted of a single test group enrolled in a leadership theories course who were either leadership minors required to take the course or non-minors enrolled in the course as an elective. Student leadership practices were measured using the online self-report version of the *Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI)* in the 2010 fall semester.

The SLPI's internal statistical reliability tested to have a correlation coefficient of generally above .66 compared to a score of .50 which is considered acceptable, while the test-retest reliability had a correlation coefficient of .91 and greater (see Table 2). Face validity measures of the SLPI are strong because the items clearly related to the category being examined. The predictive validity showed that those leaders engaging in the five categories are more effective leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 1998).

Table 2

Student Leadership Practices Inventory Reliability Data (Kouzes & Posner, 1998)

Category	Internal (N = 1255)	Test-Retest (N = 37)
Challenging the Process	0.66	0.94
Inspiring a Shared Vision	0.79	0.93
Enabling Others to Act	0.70	0.95
Modeling the Way	0.68	0.91
Encouraging the Heart	0.80	0.96

Participants ($n = 34$) consisted of 18 leadership studies minors and 16 non-minors enrolled a leadership theories course. Twenty-eight students were enrolled in the minor at the time of the study and invited to participate (response rate of 68% for minors). All classifications (freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors) were represented and 21 participants were female and 13 were male. A wide variety of majors were included, totaling 14. The average GPA was a 2.90.

Findings

The researchers used a one-sample t-test to compare results of this study's population (students enrolled in a leadership course) to the norm group of the Student Leadership Practices Inventory (SLPI). The results indicated that students enrolled in a leadership class scored significantly higher in all categories of the *Five Fundamental Practices of Exemplary Leadership* model as shown in Table 3. In other words, the mean scores of the students in this study were higher than the mean scores of the SLPI normative data.

Table 3

One Sample T-test for Study Participants and Norms of Measurement Tool

Category	Mean	DF	t-Value	P-Value
Challenging the Process	22.045	1	20.507	0.031*
Inspire a Shared Vision	22.24	1	17.24	0.0369*
Enabling Others to Act	24.03	1	160.2	0.004*
Modeling the Way	22.405	1	22.294	0.0285*
Encouraging the Heart	22.95	1	37.623	0.0169*

* Denotes statistical significant difference where alpha = 0.05

The data was also analyzed using an unpaired t-test (shown in Table 4) between the SLPI results of the participants that were minors versus non-minors in the leadership theories course.

Inspiring a vision and *enabling others to act* showed a significant difference, with leadership studies minors scoring higher in those two categories than non-minors.

Table 4

Unpaired T-Test for Minor and Non-Minor Participants

Category	Group	Mean	Variance	Std. Dev.	Std. Err	Mean Diff	DF	t-Value	P-Value
Modeling the Way	Non-Minors	22.5	7.733	2.781	0.695	-1.722	32	-1.865	0.0714
	Minors	24.222	6.771	2.602	0.613				
Inspire a Shared Vision	Non-Minors	22.188	18.029	4.246	1.062	-2.535	32	-2.086	.0450*
	Minors	24.722	7.624	2.761	0.651				
Challenge the Process	Non-Minors	22.5	12.667	3.559	0.89	-1.167	32	-1.116	0.2726
	Minors	23.667	6.235	2.497	0.589				
Enabling Others to Act	Non-Minors	22.75	16.867	4.107	1.027	-2.694	32	-2.467	.0192*
	Minors	25.444	4.144	2.036	0.48				
Encouraging the Heart	Non-Minors	23.313	9.429	3.071	0.768	-0.465	32	-0.359	0.7217
	Minors	23.778	18.418	4.292	1.012				

* Denotes statistical significant difference where alpha = 0.05

The researchers also compared the data in an unpaired t-test between minor and non-minors for GPA and class with no significant difference. One difference was found between genders where females scored higher than males in the category, *encouraging the heart*.

Limitations to this study include a small sample size of 34 students from one institution, therefore results may not necessarily be generalized to other institutions. Furthermore, participants were volunteers, therefore a selective bias may be evident. In addition, the SLPI self-report version only was used (the observer report was not used) which may have contributed to a tendency to over- or under-report leadership characteristics based on self-perceptions of leadership characteristics.

Conclusions and Implications

In summary, this study found a significant difference between participants' (both minors and non-minors enrolled in leadership theories course) exemplary leadership practices as compared to SLPI normative data. Furthermore, minors scored higher than non-minors on two of the five leadership practices in the categories of *inspiring a vision* and *enabling others to act*. The findings suggest that when students are enrolled in a leadership course, they are more proficient in the leadership characteristics that define exemplary leadership. Furthermore, leadership minors appear to be more proficient in the categories which require having a vision and fostering collaboration. Could it be that they have had more experiences that foster these characteristics? Anecdotally, the researchers have observed that leadership minors bring a wide array of leadership experiences with some with practically none and others with advanced experiences.

This is the first known study using the SLPI to measure leadership practices for a curriculum-based leadership program and significant differences were found that may indicate a higher level of leadership performance for students participating in curriculum-based leadership programs. The findings open a series of questions to be addressed in further research. What are the leadership characteristics of students who take leadership courses and are their leadership characteristics different from students who participate in co-curricular leadership programs? The results of this study indicate that there are differences. Curricular leadership programs may need to take this into account in course development to develop more effective programs for students.

The researchers believe that students with more leadership experiences or refined leadership characteristics may be more likely to take a leadership class, or even minor in leadership. So what draws students to leadership classes? How are they similar or different

from the general college student population? Can enrolling in a leadership course make a difference with more remarkable outcomes than engaging in a co-curricular leadership experience? The insights gained through this study allows leadership educators to better understand our students as leaders, or at least their self-perceptions of their capabilities, as well as better understand how we can contribute to developing leadership in our students.

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