Uncovering common elements among undergraduate leadership degree programs

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Abstract

Purpose – This research sought to determine if there existed a common set of courses amongst undergraduate leadership degree programs, provide guidance for new program development and program revision, promote discussion about future leadership curriculum development and provide a starting point for developing common leadership curriculum expectations nationally.

Design/methodology/approach – Content analysis was performed.

Findings – Program course similarities appear to represent the organic development of unofficial common core requirements within undergraduate leadership programs. Further, there appeared to be no significant trend as to which academic department leadership programs were placed.

Originality/value – This study identifies commonly occurring classes in traditional leadership degrees, offering insights for the development of new programs and assessment of current leadership degrees.

Keywords Leadership education, Leadership competencies, Teaching and learning of leadership, Courses and curricula

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

This research started during a curriculum review of a statewide adult degree completion program that offers a Bachelor of Science degree in organizational leadership. The review committee asked the question: "What typical courses make up an undergraduate degree in leadership?" The Bachelor of Science degree in organizational leadership program began in 2007 and would not have met the criteria for this study, based on the criteria outlined in the "Methods" section. It focused on business related coursework with less than 45% of courses including leadership and leadership-adjacent topics. Preliminary research was conducted to guide the curriculum review of this program and bring its requirements in line with other leadership degrees. However, without official guidelines, there were some challenges getting administrators and professors on board with the program revision suggestions. The preliminary results of this study provided the guidance needed to revise the curriculum. In Fall of 2022, 60% of the core requirements will be leadership-related coursework.

Literature review

As an area of study, leadership is relatively young with the first leadership programs at the bachelors and masters level appearing in the 1980s (Perruci & McManus, 2013). The development of these programs followed Burns' (1978) call for the academic study

of leadership. Since that time, leadership has traditionally been studied through the lens of a specific discipline (e.g. political science, history, business) which requires the leadership scholar to cross disciplines and "integrate information from many different perspectives" (Riggio, 2012, pp. 4–5). Martin and Allen (2016) stated that this interdisciplinary approach to the study and practice of leadership results in an inconsistent approach to scholarship in the field. It is further reflected by the fact that major degree programs in leadership education vary greatly in title, discipline placement and credit hour requirements (Greenleaf, Kastle, Sramek, & Brungardt, 2018). Despite these inconsistencies, there are an increasing number of institutions offering bachelor's degrees and minors in leadership (Leupold, 2019; Diallo & Gerhardt, 2017). However, according to Kellerman (2018), leadership education varies dramatically between institutions as there exists no standardized core curriculum. In fact, Boyd (2011) pointed out this disparity when he stated the term leadership had been diluted with a tendency to use the term "leadership" on programs that are "not grounded in leadership theory or development." Even within specific leadership curriculums, teachers of leadership employ various and separate pedagogical methods to teach leadership (Kellerman, 2018). Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, and Arensdorf (2006) found little consistency as to where leadership programs were placed, tremendous range in credit hour requirements with the programs and a lack of clear career placement. However, most programs studied focused on theory and application (Brungardt *et al.*, 2006). Despite the disparity, Friesen (2018) stated that, regardless of discipline placement, graduates from a leadership program should come out of their program with "foundational knowledge" that ensures a "universal language for practicing leadership" (p. 51). While Brungardt *et al.* (2006) offered an examination of courses based on broad based categories, very little research explores the similarities in coursework regardless of which discipline houses the program. Brungardt *et al.* (2006), sought to examine common program outcomes and themes among 15 organizational leadership major programs and subsequent work by Greenleaf, Kastle, Arensdorf, Whitaker, and Sramek (2017), studied the nature and scope of leadership programs at 45 institutions.

Specifically, Brungardt *et al.* (2006) examined program outcomes and themes as well as categorized curriculum offerings into six categories: (1) theories/history; (2) skills/behaviors, (3) context courses; (4) issues courses; (5) practicum; and (6) support courses) of 15 programs. In comparison, Greenleaf *et al.* (2017) primarily focused on the title of majors and degree type.

Building upon the work of Brungardt *et al.* (2006) and Greenleaf *et al.* (2017), this study examined undergraduate degree programs at 63 institutions. This research also found commonalities in specific course offerings required for degree completion. However, support courses (those required courses that were not specifically related to leadership or, what we termed, "leadership-adjacent" were excluded. Institutions were selected based on two primary criteria: (1) the core courses in the major needed to have more than 50% of their courses grounded in the study of leadership; and (2) programs could not be focused on a particular industry (e.g. educational leadership or ministerial leadership). A content analysis of required courses in the core curriculum of the programs, along with additional required courses for graduation, was utilized to develop a list of common topic areas offered in the field of leadership studies.

Recently, the International Leadership Association (ILA) convened a task force to develop guidelines for curricular and co-curricular leadership programs (GPTF, 2021). The General Principles Task Force (GPTF) (2021) identified building blocks for developing a leadership program's content. These building blocks included foundation of the program, leadership concepts, personal development, organizational leadership, global leadership and ethics (2021).

Methods

Potential participants were identified from the list of programs provided by Greenleaf *et al.* (2017), listings in the National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs and programs identified from members of the Association of Leadership Educators (ALE). Further, the researchers conducted internet searches using key words related to bachelor's degree programs in leadership to find additional programs not listed in the other sources. From that initial list, the researchers evaluated the programs for appropriateness to this study. For inclusion, the core courses in the major needed to have more than 50% of their courses grounded in the study of leadership or be "leadership adjacent," e.g. organizational behavior, communications, or ethics. Programs that were fundamentally business degrees or focused on a particular industry (e.g. educational leadership or ministerial leadership) were eliminated from consideration. Our decision to exclude leadership degrees focused on specific industries was tied to our desire to examine degrees that were applicable to multiple career scenarios. Leadership degrees within a business department were not considered industry specific as business concepts are often applied in multiple settings, not just a specific industry. Ultimately, 63 universities were considered for inclusion in the study, representing 80% of examined programs (excluding degrees focused on a specific industry, as noted).

The researchers then conducted a content analysis of required core curriculum to develop a list of commonly offered courses in an undergraduate leadership degree. Supporting courses that appeared as part of the core requirements (e.g. human resources management, marketing, project management) were excluded. The research team categorized courses by basic content as opposed to course titles which varied between institutions. For example, a "Foundations of Organizational Leadership" course may have content that served as an introductory course, or it may serve as a course in leadership theory. Following the initial analysis of core major requirements, the researchers then examined required courses for graduation that were not part of the major core. For example, a Bachelor of Business Administration (BBA) degree may have a professional business core that is a requirement for the degree with major requirements that would make it a BBA with a major in Leadership. This allowed the researchers to find courses that may not be in the major requirements, but are common to other programs, e.g. ethics or communications.

Findings

Based on our content analysis, 12 core content areas were identified. In the table below (Table 1) it is clear that, although the course naming practices vary, the core content follows a

Course category	Percentage of inclusion (%)
Capstone	81
Theory	71
Ethics	68
Communications	59
Organizational studies	57
Foundations	57
Team dynamics	56
Change	51
Diversity	35
Global leadership	33
Conflict resolution and negotiation	33
Decision-making and critical thinking	30
Source(s): Authors' own work	

trend. Some course titles identify multiple core content areas in one class, e.g. Leadership in Organizations. However, in these examples, we obtained the course syllabi and were able to identify the actual core content(s) being taught. During our initial analysis, when courses encompassed two areas (e.g. Global Leadership and Diversity), we counted the course in both categories. The number of courses encompassing two areas was less than 10%. The exception were Foundations courses that were identified to be primarily theory-based offerings. Rare courses offerings at individual institutions were eliminated from inclusion. The top inclusion rate exceeded 80% for Capstone, which included internships, with a mean of 53% for all courses. Three categories appeared in more than two-thirds of the degree programs examined: Capstone (81%), Theory (71%) and Ethics (68%). Five other topic areas exceeded 50%. The remaining four areas tended to appear at less than 35% of the degree programs.

Based on the analysis, the low percentages of common courses would appear to support Kellerman's (2018) assertion of the lack of any standardized core curriculum. However, it does appear that an organically developing trend towards an unofficial, standard curriculum is occurring.

In examination of these courses, it is important to consider that some of the categories utilized for this study are often taught as part of other topic areas. For example, Change and Innovation are often included in courses such as Organizational Behavior (Cooper, Hellriegel, & Slocum, 2018; DuBrin, 2016; Kinicki & Fugate, 2018; Scandura, 2019). In this instance, if we were to add these subjects into the Organizational Studies category, it would bump to 79% of programs. Considering Global Leadership and Diversity as a single category would nearly double the number of programs offering courses in that category to 65% (taking into consideration two courses that would have counted in both areas). After considering these topic mergers, eight revised categories emerged.

(1) Foundations courses often serve as an introduction to the study of leadership, deliver students an overview of leadership practice, offer self-assessment tools and reflections and provide strategies for self-development as a leader.

(2) Theory courses focus on the historical review of leadership theory accompanied by current developments in understanding leadership theory.

(3) Leadership Communication courses are varied and encompass courses in professional communication methods, interpersonal communication, business communication and communication in the workplace.

(4) Team Dynamics focuses on topics such as creating a team, planning and communicating in a team, leading a team, gaining power and influence, developing self-awareness in small group contexts, creative problem-solving, motivation and effective team performance. Course titles included "Team Leadership," "Small Group Dynamics," "Team Dynamics," "Teamwork," "Leading Teams," and "Individual and Team Processes."

(5) Organizational Studies courses are those that relate to the study of organizations such as "Organizational Behavior (OB)," "Organizational Development," and "Organizational Theory." In addition, courses that specialized in OB subtopics, such as "Innovation and Change", were included in this category.

(6) Ethics courses are designed to examine workplace and personal ethics through the study of basic philosophical theories. The category also includes "Decision-Making and Critical Thinking", which are often cornerstones of business ethics courses.

(7) Global Leadership and Diversity focuses on leadership practices across cultures and explores the ideas of cultural diversity and globalization. Course titles included "Global Leadership and Diversity," "Leadership, Diversity and Multiculturalism," and "Leadership in Diverse and Global Contexts."

(8) Capstone courses are culminating experiences of a program and include capstone courses, internships and senior research projects.

Although texts in leadership communication courses will often cover Team Leadership and Group Communication (Barrett, 2014), we felt that the topics were significant on their own to keep them separate. With these revised categories, the top inclusion rate increased by two percent with an increase of the mean average to 68.5% (Table 2). It is important to note that programs that offered two separate courses within a single category were not counted twice.

The intent of this study was to primarily examine courses required to graduate (core courses and discipline-specific requirements) and does not consider courses offered as electives. However, an examination of elective offerings from some of the programs studied showed courses such Global Leadership, Leadership and Gender and Innovation and Change. In consideration of the idea that these topics are important enough to offer, even as electives, we updated our percentages one more time (Table 3). The top inclusion rate grew by one percent and the mean to 71.25%.

Another area examined was department and/or school affiliation. We found no clear consensus on where leadership programs were housed. The largest placements included business at 27%, an actual leadership department at 13% and within colleges/schools of professional studies at 11%. Other departments that appeared included political science, engineering and technology and agriculture. While we also found numerous programs within adult education, most of those programs were eliminated from the study as they did not meet

Course category	Percentage of inclusion
Capstone	83
Organizational studies	79
Ethics	76
Theory	71
Global leadership and diversity	65
Communications	59
Foundations/Introduction	57
Team dynamics	56
Source(s): Authors' own work	

Table 2.
Revised percentage of topic inclusion

Course category	Percentage of inclusion
Capstone	84
Organizational studies	81
Ethics	79
Theory	71
Global leadership and diversity	76
Communications	62
Team dynamics	60
Foundations/Introduction	57
Source(s): Authors' own work	

Table 3.
Revised percentage of topic inclusion including electives

the standard of more than 50% of their courses grounded in the study of leadership or "leadership adjacent" topics and appeared to use the term "leadership" as a degree title of convenience.

It may be important to note that our categories differ from those of Brungardt *et al.* (2006) in that they did not distinguish between foundation and theory courses, nor did they separate skills/behavior courses by topic. However, what Brungardt *et al.* (2006) classified as "practicum" relates well to our "capstone" category.

Discussion

Themes common in leadership curricula

The eight common themes identified in this study finds some support from the ILA's GPTF (GPTF, 2021) mentioned earlier. Building blocks that correlated with this study included foundation of the program, leadership concepts, organizational leadership, global leadership and ethics (2021). We further found additional support for the themes developed from the research.

Foundations/Introduction. The ILA's GPTF (GPTF, 2021) suggested that the foundation of the program is a building block that establishes the basis for the rest of the program's content. The GPTF (2021) stated that "the design of the content in terms of sequence, interconnectivity, interdisciplinarity, and its relation to outcomes needs to be identified while observing the nature of the target audience."

Organizational studies. Sarros, Cooper, and Santora (2008) linked organizational behavior and leadership, stating that "transformational leadership is associated with organizational culture, primarily through the processes of articulating a vision, and to a lesser extent through the setting of high-performance expectations and providing individual support to workers." Kilburg and Donohue (2011) identified several organizational factors as key components to developing an integrated model of leadership including organizational systems, organizational environment, working relationships and organizational performance. The ILA's GPTF (2021) supported the concept that organizational leadership lies in the interaction of the individual and the organization.

Ethics. Kapur (2018) stated that leadership and ethics are an integrated process that frames a leader's actions and purposes. Further, the GPTF (2021) identified ethics as a building block for leadership programs to address morality, legality, integrity and governance issues within the program. Ciulla (2020) defined a "variety of dimensions" by which leadership ethics should be examined. These include the following: The ethics of the leader as a person who wishes to lead; the ethics of the leader-follower relationship; the ethics of the process of leadership; and the ethics of what the leader does or does not do. Ciulla then added that "[a] richer understanding of the moral challenges that are distinctive to leaders and leadership is particularly important for leadership development" and emphasizes that ethical leadership is not a black-and-white issue. Kenney (2017) recommended that "ethical perspectives, ethical decision making, and ethical leadership theories be incorporated into the curriculum presented in a leadership development program" to provide students with guidelines that make for quality, ethical leadership.

Theory. The ILA's GPTF (2021) recommended that a leadership program be conducted in a "'trusted space' that integrates theory, practice, and experiential learning to build core competencies such as critical thinking, problem-solving, and teamwork" to avoid cultural bias (Allen, 2018). An effective leadership program "consider[s] its campus culture" and focuses on a theory-to-practice model utilizing both structured and unstructured interactions between collaborative bodies (Guthrie, 2010).

Global leadership and diversity. Javidan, Dorfman, De Luque, and House (2006) defined global leadership as "the ability to influence people who are not like the leader and come from

different cultural backgrounds." Global leadership in a society defined by globalization encompasses "influencing others in a global context to achieve a common goal" and "initiating change across cultures within an organization" (Perez, 2017). According to the International Leadership Association's (ILA) GPTF (2021), "embedding global leadership in the program's content acknowledges the variations and complexities of leadership within the contexts of transnational economies, political spectrums, and environmental ecosystems." An effective leadership program may focus on themes such as cultural attitudes cultural skills and cultural knowledge, which encompass behaviors such as understanding the emotions of others, adapting to new cultural expectations and learning about a particular culture one is working with (Hassanzadeh, Silong, Asmuni, & Abd Wahat, 2015).

Communications. There are several overlapping components between communication and leadership studies, especially in research related to the "theoretical and functional approaches" and "much of the work on communication and leadership comes from the subfield of organizational communication" (Cunningham, Hazel, & Hayes, 2020). Johnson and Hackman (2018) call leadership a "special form of communication" that "modifies the attitudes and behaviors of others to meet shared group goals and needs." Johansson (2018) wrote that "any goal or common purpose needs to be verbalized, become known, be understood, and be accepted before anyone can act to accomplish it." The study of leadership communication touches on other vital areas of leadership development, including diversity and "communicating across cultures and identities" (Banwart, 2020).

Team dynamics. Due to the importance of teams in the success of organizations, research has increasingly focused on the role of leadership on team performance (Burke, Stagl, Salas, Pierce, & Kendall, 2006; Klein, Ziegert, Knight, & Xiao, 2006). Research surrounding leadership and team performance tends to focus on leadership behaviors that impact and develop that performance (Srivastava, Bartol, & Locke, 2006; Yun, Faraj, & Sims, 2005). Welch (2000) acknowledged that "what leadership education should include may vary depending on a person's concept of leadership and the purpose of training" but generally defines the "heart of leadership education" as including elements such as problem-solving skills, communication, teamwork and working with goals.

Capstone. Wagenaar (1993) defined a capstone as "a culminating experience in which students are expected to integrate, extend, critique, and apply knowledge gained in the major." The ILA's recommended that the outcomes of a successful leadership program be assessed on a regular basis. According to the ILA's GPTF (2021), a capstone project acts as a viable means of assessment and "must provide meaningful information" related to the program's goals and learning outcomes. Quality capstones should teach students to synthesize previously learned information and use it to solve real world problems (Crunkilton, Cepica, & Fluker, 1997). To achieve this outcome, objectives typical to successful capstone projects include preparing students for their career via profession-related experience, "increase[ing] students' understanding of the big picture" and "help[ing] students understand the relevance of theory and research" in their practice (Kerka, 2001; Fairchild & Taylor, 2000; Rhodus & Hoskins, 1995; Thomas, 1998). Fairchild and Taylor (2000) found that students who participate in capstone courses typically require less training in the workplace environment, and they include leadership in their range of soft skills essential in today's professional society. Strickland and Welch (2019) asserted that "providing opportunities to experience leadership roles in an authentic context before graduation assists students in successful transition to professional practice."

Conclusions/recommendations
In our research, we found that that 79.7% of undergraduate leadership programs, excluding industry specific programs, met our study parameters, i.e. the core courses in the major

having more than 50% of their courses grounded in the study of leadership or be "leadership adjacent." Within the 63 qualified institutions, the mean average of those offering one of the established eight core areas is 71.25%. The top four occurring topics (Capstone, Organizational Studies, Ethics and Theory) all appear in more than 70% of the studied programs and the remaining topics (Global Leadership and Diversity, Communications, Team Dynamics and Foundations) appear in more than 56% of the studied programs. While the ILA's GPTF (2021) identified building blocks for developing a leadership program's content, our research was in process prior to the release of their recommendations. Therefore, we assess that the core classes in the studied programs grew organically without the benefit of ILA's guidance. Although Boyd (2011) and Kellerman (2018) both indicated that leadership education has dramatic variances and there is no standardized curriculum, we found tremendous similarities in program offerings. That said, our study focused on course titles and catalog descriptions and are limited in assessing actual course content, pedagogy and topic emphasis.

Further, we did not see differences as it relates to program placement other than some topic areas (Ethics, Communications) which may be part of degree requirements as opposed to being major-specific requirements. The one disparity we did notice was in programs located within adult education programs. Just over 20% of the total leadership programs considered for inclusion in this study were eliminated because they failed to meet the threshold of a minimum of 50% leadership-related courses in their core curriculum. As mentioned, these programs appeared to use the term "leadership" as a degree title of convenience or as a marketing term to avoid using a degree title such as "interdisciplinary studies" or to provide a business-lite degree that did not have to meet accreditation standards for one of the business accrediting bodies. These programs provide an opportunity for further research into the use of leadership as a degree title for a degree that is not clearly focused on the discipline of leadership. Future studies should include investigations about why institutions have created and continue to create leadership programs with a minimal focus on the discipline of leadership.

It is important to note that in this study every effort was made for the researchers to remain completely neutral on the topic of whether a standard common core was a positive or negative trend. However, future researchers may choose to weigh the pros and cons of this naturally occurring trend. Advocates for a common leadership core may point to the need for standardization as the discipline continues to grow and gain more acceptance and understanding from employers. Additionally, advocates may point out that a formal accreditation process for leadership may be a natural result of standardization with the goals of officially recognizing programs that meet standards set by external regulators. The proponents may even choose to research what core knowledge should be expected from a leadership program for a student to graduate. Proponents may advocate that a common leadership core improves the legitimacy of the leadership academic degree and ensures the degree is not watered down or minimized by institutions using leadership as a marketing tool or a title of convenience.

Opponents of standardization may raise concerns about potential negative effects on academic freedom. Program developers may question the degree of creativity and innovation possible in a nationally accepted standardized common core. Potentially, future researchers may discuss standardization as being detrimental to the growth of leadership degrees as colleges may decide traditional leadership programs require too many courses and, consequently, faculty members to administer. Opponents may also point to the successes of non-traditional leadership programs with positive alumni and community outcomes. Finally, researchers may investigate if the standardization of the courses makes leadership a less desirable degree option for a portion of the target audience of students who may be looking for a more flexible degree.

While our study focused on common course requirements in undergraduate leadership degree programs, we hope that this study is just the beginning of this national conversation. We hope that future researchers will also continue to study leadership programs in totality to include mission, philosophy and co-curricular programs. This descriptive research study did find a trend towards a common leadership core. However, it will be up to future educators, practitioners and researchers to determine the future of leadership education.

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