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Higher Education Student Leadership Development:

5 Keys to Success

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Executive Summary

Leadership development for students is an increasingly important part of the higher education experience. When students graduate, they'll be expected to be self-aware, skilled collaborators who are effective individual contributors with the potential to lead teams, departments, and eventually entire organizations.

Formal leadership development programs enhance what students learn in the classroom by giving them powerful tools for personal and professional success. They're also a differentiator for many institutions. They help schools attract more high-ability students, distinguish themselves from peer institutions, and increase the value of a student's education.

Leadership development helps students strengthen their communication and collaboration skills, develop resilience, become more adaptable, and prepare for a world in which they will be expected to be agile and innovative.

Our research has found that students who participate in formal leadership development programs are more engaged in their education and have a stronger sense of belonging.

Implementing a successful leadership development program is challenging, and there is no single template or approach that works across the board.

However, based on our decades of experience in leadership development and research, as well as numerous collaborations with colleges and universities, we've found the most successful leadership development programs share several common elements.

Here, we lay out 5 key practices for high-impact leadership development:

- A proven leadership model and development framework

- Formative evaluation of students

- Relevant, meaningful leadership experiences

- Impactful coaching

- Tools and methods that provide a rich, engaging experience

Student leadership development programs that include these 5 elements are much more likely to be successful in nurturing individual growth, improving post-graduation opportunities, and increasing student and alumni engagement with the university.

KEY PRACTICE

Proven Leadership Model & Developmental Framework

Successful student leadership development programs should be informed by proven leadership models and developmental frameworks that meet students where they are.

The Professional Standards for Higher Education of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education indicates that multiple leadership theories and models should inform program design. The leadership model presented to students should be clear in how it defines leadership, the roles that leaders take, and the competencies that support leadership.

Over the past 50 years, we've moved beyond the notion of leader as the individual in charge to leader as someone involved in leadership roles and processes within a group, organization, or community.

This includes being a contributing member of a group, putting the success of the collective ahead of personal achievement, helping create shared purpose, and more. We all play multiple roles at work, at home, and in our communities. An expansive view of leadership allows us to contribute more in all these contexts.

CCL pioneered this concept of shared leadership, which can be integrated with can augment other leadership models and theories. This model frames effective leadership in terms of 3 key outcomes: Direction, Alignment, and Commitment (DAC).

Direction, Alignment & Commitment Defined

Direction: Agreement on overall goals, aims, and mission.

Alignment: Organization, coordination, and integration of resources, work, and knowledge in service of shared direction.

Commitment: Willingness to subsume personal interests in favor of the interests of the group and the group's goals.

Leadership educators help students develop essential skills like managing themselves, working with others, and strengthening their resilience, all of which support DAC. We also use a framework that provides structure for optimizing leader development: Assessment, Challenge, and Support (ACS).

- **Assessment** helps individuals understand themselves better, identify strengths and weaknesses, and see how they can make an impact.

- **Challenge** places demands on individuals that push them to learn and grow.

- **Support** is necessary when asking students to grow. It can include emotional support, skill development, access to resources and services, and a social context that nurtures growth.

ACS is a proven roadmap for leadership development programs. When you pair a clear leadership model and a proven developmental framework, you can provide student leaders a strong foundation for learning and growth.

KEY PRACTICE

Formative Evaluation of Students

The purpose of a leadership development program is, of course, improving students' practice of leadership. But effective programs do more than just hope for this outcome. They evaluate students before, during, and after their leadership development experiences based on criteria closely linked to the program's goals and strategy.

Formative evaluation helps guide individual leadership development and helps students and leadership educators identify an individual's strengths and weaknesses. As students learn and encounter challenges, this knowledge should inform how they grow in response to those challenges, and should guide the efforts of faculty, facilitators, and coaches to support student growth.

In addition, formative evaluation over multiple cohorts of student leaders provides program administrators with valuable information on what's working well in the program and what could be improved. No effective leadership development program is born complete on its first day, and as students, universities, and society change, so do the needs of leadership development programs.

It's important for leadership development program leaders and faculty to understand that post-program evaluations can sometimes be lower than pre-program evaluations. This is because students usually become more self-aware over the course of the program, and as a result they often become more critical of their own abilities and characteristics.

This is not a bad outcome — self-awareness is an important leadership competency — but anyone evaluating the program does need to understand this dynamic. In-program assessments are useful here, because they can clarify exactly how students are growing during the leadership development experience.

Formative evaluation creates a more powerful learning experience for participants and provides a tool for leadership development programs to continue to strengthen and improve their offerings.

The Leadership Indicator for Students™ Identifies Key Areas for Development

We developed the Leadership Indicator for Students (LIS) to address the need for an easily accessible, high-quality evaluation tool universities could use to conduct formative evaluation. A survey of students helped identify 17 key attributes, which form the basis of the LIS student leadership measure.

The LIS framework assesses 3 components of leadership:

- **Leading self:** self-aware, accountable, resilient, having integrity.

- **Leading with others:** collaborative, communicative, active listener, considerate, respectful, accepting.

- **Changing your world:** visionary, motivating, encouraging.

The tool measures each student's self-perceptions of these attributes, perceptions of importance, perceptions of their peer group, and the faculty/staff's perceptions of their student groups. This combination of data lets schools identify key areas where attributes are rated as highly important but in need of development.

KEY PRACTICE

Relevant, Meaningful Leadership Experiences

Over the past several decades, colleges and universities have transformed educational experiences by giving students opportunities to apply newly acquired knowledge.

Leadership development, likewise, is most effective when students can put their new knowledge and self-awareness into practice.

The most effective student leadership programs create meaningful, relevant experiences that are engaging, impactful, and tied closely to students' curricula or extracurricular interests. These kinds of personally significant experiences help students internalize their leadership development lessons.

Frequently, these are blended experiences, with a mix of classroom learning and an application, such as a group project for a class, an internship, leading a project or student organization, or volunteering in the community.

The most successful student leadership development programs use these experiences as centerpieces of their programs. In addition to leadership development, these programs typically deepen academic engagement, strengthen peer bonds, and boost students' attachment to their university.

Leading in the Curriculum

Don't just add leadership development to your curriculum — integrate it.

CCL, Southern Methodist University's Hart Center for Engineering Leadership (HCEL), and the Bobby B. Lyle School of Engineering faculty collaborated to re-envision the Introduction to Engineering and Design course, a multidisciplinary, project-based class for first-year students.

Together, we created a solution where students learned scrum process management practices infused with the Lyle Leadership Framework and CCL leadership development strategies. Over the semester-long course, improvements in collaboration and shared learning enabled teams to work together more effectively, navigate interpersonal conflicts, and take more risks.

When external evaluators reviewed the Lyle School of Engineering, they specifically mentioned the extraordinary innovation, impact, and value of the first-year design course.

Marc P. Christensen, Dean of the Lyle School of Engineering, champions the school's holistic approach to engineering education: "Why wait until you've graduated and you're 3 years out before you start integrating engineering and leadership development? If we can get our students to be reflective and purposeful about their professional development now, that will accelerate them into a fantastic career trajectory. That is what I call an unfair advantage."

KEY PRACTICE

Coaching

Coaching is one of the highest impact practices a student leadership development program can implement. One-on-one coaching can help students explore unique personal challenges and uncover insights that are less likely to surface in a group setting.

Establishing an effective coaching program requires 2 key components:

1 **Institutions must choose and train their coaches carefully.** Coaches may be staff, student peers, faculty, or even alumni, as long as they can meet with students. An effective coaching program must be grounded in a common framework, such as CCL's ASC model, and coaches must be well-versed in implementing the chosen model.

Training for coaches should provide ample time to develop and practice key coaching skills; it should also include guidance on what to do if a student discloses an issue (such as mental health concerns or substance abuse) that requires medical or mental health intervention.

2 **The coaching program should be structured to complement the rest of the leadership development experience.** Consider whether coaching is appropriate after students receive feedback from formal assessments, following a specific leadership development experience, or on a periodic schedule, such as monthly, once a semester, or annually.

Though coaches and students will broach a variety of subjects, some structure can ensure that the coaching connects to the leadership development program's goals and structure.

Coaching Future Leaders

North Carolina's Golden LEAF Scholars Leadership Program (GLSLP) is designed to prepare the next generation of rural leaders. It recruits college students and provides a scholarship that includes 2 annual leadership conferences, focused summer internship experiences, and coaching.

During their first 2 years of college, from January through August, Golden LEAF Scholars receive one-on-one coaching. The coaches are recruited from rural North Carolina — often from the same counties as the students. The coaches receive 3 days of training based on CCL's extensive experience with coaching, learning best practices as well as how to handle specific challenges that can arise with college students. Coaches help the students set meaningful goals, overcome obstacles, and learn from their experiences.

GLSLP's coaching helps tie together all the elements of the program, connects it to individual students' experiences, and helps participants build a stronger professional network.

KEY PRACTICE

Access to Tools & Methods to Create a Rich, Engaging Experience

Learning experiences are a critical part of an effective leadership development program. They are often where students are first exposed to critical leadership ideas and where they begin to learn more about themselves. But in order to be effective, these learning experiences must be engaging.

In high-quality leadership development programs, students spend time with leadership educators and one another in group learning environments, and they also have purposeful time for individual reflection.

The most effective leadership development programs are ones in which educators look for

ways to include best-in-class tools and methods to conduct assessments and convey critical content.

Compelling learning experiences incorporate active learning opportunities tied to leadership concepts. They create appropriately challenging situations where problem-solving requires collective effort.

Even when programs have access to experts with deep knowledge of leadership development, perhaps through an academic unit on campus, program administrators may still find themselves trying to create learning materials.

Our Higher Education Practice has created a set of leader development modules that educators can use to build a new curriculum or refresh an existing program. Module content addresses developmentally appropriate leadership concepts, informed by CCL's research and curriculum design expertise. To promote engagement and retention of concepts, each module incorporates teaching methods that promote compelling, interactive learning experiences.

Each 45-minute module is supported by resources for instructors, including a facilitator's guide, customizable PowerPoint slides, and a video that highlights module design elements and provides facilitation tips.

Perhaps the most powerful part of each module is the built-in assessment tool that adapts to each student's level of understanding, allowing you to assess student mastery of core concepts. A data visualization dashboard provides real-time insight into student outcomes. Comparisons between pre- and post-module measures are at your fingertips. Charts, tables, and infographics may be easily exported for use in outcome reports and presentations.

Recommendations for Transformative Student Leadership Programs

Creating and sustaining transformative student leadership programs can be daunting. The 5 key practices we introduce here, however, can provide — or strengthen — foundational structure and strategy for any university. Here's how you can get started:

1

Assess your current leadership framework and leadership models. For your framework, consider whether you've built an explicit progression of leadership learning and experiences that is developmentally appropriate. You probably pull from multiple leadership models. Ask yourself whether the leadership model you teach is coherent and whether it meets your students' needs.

2

Use best-in-class tools and methods to create an engaging learning environment. Today's students are sophisticated consumers of education. Rich, engaging learning tools, such as computerized assessments, multimedia learning materials, well thought out small group exercises, and other curriculum tools go a long way toward keeping students engaged.

3

Include relevant, meaningful leadership experiences. Giving students opportunities to apply newfound self-awareness and leadership know-how to projects they find meaningful — in the classroom, on campus, or in your community — is essential to helping them mature and grow.

4

Evaluate students before, during, and after leadership experiences. Measuring leadership indicators and attributes is useful for guiding individuals as they learn and mature. Just as important, evaluating students as a group can highlight your leadership program's strengths and illuminate opportunities for improvement.

5

Consider the power of coaching. Providing coaching to students in a leadership program allows you to further personalize their experiences and work through individual challenges. Most programs start by engaging outside expertise to train an initial cohort of coaches. Sometimes, universities also choose to hire trainers or consultants to teach their coaches how to train other coaches and further strengthen the initial coach cohort.

Conclusion

The most effective leadership development programs adapt research-based principles and tools to meet students where they are, whether first-year students just finding their way on campus or seniors preparing to enter the professional world.

In addition to incorporating the 5 key practices described above, they're also purposeful in their goals, operations, and culture.

Perhaps the most important practice for those tasked with creating and strengthening such programs is ensuring that the program addresses the unique challenges and opportunities of their school and students.

The best programs have administrators who are constantly seeking ways to make their leadership development experiences more powerful, and are always mindful that their goal is not to merely to provide experiences but to produce leaders who will make a difference in the world.

READY TO TAKE THE NEXT STEP?

CCL offers leadership development programs designed for the unique environment and specific challenges of higher education. Whether you're just creating your first student leadership program or revamping a decades-old initiative, we can help.

In addition to working on student-centered initiatives, we also work with faculty, staff, and administrators in higher education, helping colleges and universities be more adaptable and resilient while also strengthening strategic processes and enhancing leadership capabilities.

To learn more about CCL's higher education experience and capabilities, visit: ccl.org/highered

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