Embracing the Leadership Challenge: Leading by Service in the “Other Curriculum”

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Abstract

This study provides perspective from 21 student officers who are serving as leaders in a chapter of an honorary professional organization in their college or university. This study looked closely at their perspective of leadership through the lens of the five practices of leadership posited by Kouzes and Posner (2007, 2012). Students offered insights regarding what they were learning in regards to leadership and how they were leading their organizations. They also spoke to benefits and challenges of leadership. The findings describe lessons learned and suggest ways that universities can prepare future leaders through the vein of service during their collegiate experience.

Leadership is a primary focus in today’s schools— and rightly so. Intensifying hurdles including shrinking budgets and rising class sizes, new curricular and accountability measures, and rapidly emerging technological innovations all combine for a unique mix of obstacles and opportunities never seen before in education. Today’s educational leaders are increasingly overwhelmed. In the classroom, recent surveys indicate that teacher satisfaction is down, uncertainty and anxiety is up (MetLife Survey of the American Teacher, 2011). Teachers and administrators are soon to be will soon retire; many others are now leaving the profession, resulting in what has led researchers such as Doug Reeves (2008) to forecast as an impending crisis due to an “acute shortage of leaders” in schools and districts (p. 17). Educational students are preparing to enter an accountability environment with many societal pressures and today’s colleges and universities must be up to the task in preparing them to lead (Cress, Astin, Zimmer-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001). Interestingly, little research exists on preparing future teacher leaders during their pre-service years in the university setting (Bond, 2011).

An emerging cadre of willing leaders meanwhile waits in the wings, yet they are not resting on their laurels. Teacher education students who have distinguished themselves in their scholarship and leadership have accepted the call to face these evolving challenges even before stepping into the classroom as a faculty member. Kappa Delta Pi (KDP), an International Honorary Society of over 40,000 members, has over 600 collegiate, university, and professional chapters that are led by a group of student officers. Professional chapters are led by in-service teachers. Each collegiate group works closely with a faculty sponsor who serves as the advisor or “counselor,” yet the chapter is comprised of—and led by—students first and foremost. The chapter’s success depends on the participation—and the leadership—of its student officers. And the experiences and opportunities within these organizations are enabling future educators to prepare to lead through action in their classrooms, school, districts, and greater communities.
While much focus has been given to mentoring new teachers, developing the teacher as leader, and strengthening leadership academies to help prepare future and current administrators, another fertile opportunity that has perhaps been overlooked exists in today’s colleges and universities - the pre-service teacher as leader. Many students, just months away from their first teaching job, already are making a difference in their universities, local schools, and communities through service outside of their prescribed coursework. As Kuh (1995) emphasized, “what happens outside the classroom—the other curriculum—can contribute to valued outcomes of college” (p. 124). These students have embraced what authors Kouzes and Posner have famously called The Leadership Challenge. This paper describes, through the powerful voices and insights of these college students, leadership lessons that will impact the next generation of learners.

Framework for the Study

Every two years, KDP chapters at the university and collegiate level can distinguish themselves by receiving an ACE Award, which is an acronym for “Achieving Chapter Excellence.” These prestigious recognitions are awarded based on the five criteria of leadership development, chapter programming, chapter business meetings, membership and retention, and administrative qualifications. An outside panel of evaluators carefully weighs these criteria and only about four percent of the over 600 chapters receive the esteemed ACE Award. The researchers in this study surveyed and interviewed a sample of student leaders in these high-functioning universities and colleges that had received the 2011 ACE Award (Bond & Sterrett, in press). Both researchers have served in Kappa Delta Pi (KDP); the first author has chaired the KDP public policy committee for the past three years and the second author has served as the past president and university faculty counselor.

A bi-level selection process allowed the researchers to start with ACE campuses and then select two students from each chapter. The researchers e-mailed the faculty counselors an invitation to participate in the study and to recruit any two officers in their chapter to participate. Thus, 21 student officers at 11 college and university campuses comprised the sample for this study. A diverse group of institutions were represented in the final analysis, ranging from small, private liberal arts colleges to large, public research institutions; geographically, the institutions likewise spanned the United States. The participants were overall homogenous in terms of their characteristics of ethnicity, gender, classification, major selection, and years serving as a chapter officer as follows:
Table 1.  
*Participants by Characteristic (%)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristic</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>90.4 White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.8 African American</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.8 Latina</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>81.0 female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.0 male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classification</td>
<td>62.0 Senior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.0 Junior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>19.0 Graduate Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Major</td>
<td>81.0 Elementary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.2 High School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4.8 Middle School</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years as Officer</td>
<td>76.1 One Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>9.5 Less Than One Year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>14.4 2-5 years</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The 21 student officers that represent these successful chapters were asked questions about their leadership. Their voices capture unique perspective on emerging leadership. These officers are not solely educators-in-training; they are active leaders now. Early in *The Leadership Challenge*, the authors poise the question, “How do you get other people to want to follow you?” (p. 4). The authors outline five practices of exemplary leadership that strive to answer this foundational question—and others—in defining the exemplary leadership that our schools, districts, and communities so desperately need. They include the following:

1. Model the Way
2. Inspire a Shared Vision
3. Challenge the Process
4. Enable Others to Act; and
5. Encourage the Heart (Kouzes and Posner, 2012).

*Findings*

The five leadership practices provide the outline for this study on student leader perspective and allowed us to better understand their perspective regarding leadership development, leadership practice, professional growth, as well as challenges and successes. And their voices illustrate lessons learned in each of these five practices.

*Model the Way*

The authors stress the importance of credibility. In any organization, *clarifying values* is essential. Kouzes and Posner note, “Leaders aren’t just representing themselves. They speak
and act on behalf of a larger organization. Leaders must forge agreement around common principles and common goals” (2007, p. 15). Speaking as an officer in a mid-sized Catholic university in large city, Kevin¹, a childhood education major, noted that “In order to be a good leader, you have to adhere to the same standards that you expect the others to follow. I personally should exude those qualities and always be on point because I know that if the leaders are not on point, everything else falls apart.”

Paul, an elementary education and special education major in a large, public university in the Midwest echoed serving as a dedicated role model, noting “I lead all of our meetings and delegate tasks to our officers. I also volunteer myself to perform some of these tasks. .. A great leader never puts his or herself first and is constantly monitoring his or her peers to ensure they are in a good environment.” Being an integral part of the whole that values coherence in voice and values is of utmost importance.

Inspire a Shared Vision

To paraphrase a well-known proverb, without vision, an organization will perish. Chapter leaders learn, however, the importance of shared vision. As Kouzes and Posner (2007) emphasize, “It’s not just the leader’s vision. It’s a shared vision…. Leaders have to make sure that what they see is also something that others can see” (p. 105). Jeannie, an English major in a small, private liberal arts college in the northeast who is seeking certification in teaching children with disabilities, affirms this, noting “I’ve learned that a leader does not mean you have to have all the correct answers; it is just helping shape everyone’s ideas into one that will be best for the common good.”

This shared vision is a result of chapters working closely together in keeping with the mission of the honorary society, and leaders realizing they must mobilize consensus rather than solely defining the mission themselves. Anita, a senior elementary major from a Catholic university in the Midwest agrees, saying, “Leadership is inspiring others to do more in contribution toward a desirable goal.” This leadership requires officers who are also willing to look critically at the overall process to ensure continued excellence.

Challenging the Process

Challenging the status quo is not easy for anyone, particularly when you are a student still learning the field of teaching and striving to serve collaboratively as a team player. However, as Kouzes and Posner argue, this critical examination can instead be a purposeful, reflective approach that can sharpen the work and improve the effectiveness of the organization. They note, “Leadership isn’t about challenge for challenge’s sake… It’s about challenge for meaning’s sake. It’s about challenge with passion” (2007, p. 173). One student that stepped into a chapter leadership role was determined to make a difference. Becky, a commuter student serving in a large Northeast university as chapter president, followed a “president who was terrible.” She was urged to step into the role and noted that “I saw a big gap in the leadership role of the president…very absent, very not involved.” She had to work hard to change the dynamic of meetings as there was a lack of clarity and planning; she work to create a schedule and set goals

¹ Names of respondents and their respective institutions have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
which allowed the chapter to thrive and proactively start new initiatives such as workshops and volunteer efforts. And as a second-career student, she made a clear link to her leadership skill set and her future professions saying “I feel as a teacher I have much more opportunity to be a leader than I did in my former career.” The skills gained in the honor society, Becky noted, allowed a host of young people to “learn these skills and these beliefs... that any little thing that they do can make a difference.” Challenging the process has allowed Becky to make a difference not only in her chapter, but as a future classroom leader as well.

Enable Others to Act

No leader can solely sustain excellence; he or she must empower other members of the organization to act, contribute, and lead. Fostering collaboration is of utmost importance; Kouzes and Posner (2007) identify collaboration as “a critical competency for achieving and sustaining high performance…. Leadership is more essential when collaboration is required” (p. 224). Carina, a Master’s student at a large southwest public university, said “My strength is that I respect and allow everyone to voice their own opinions … and I make everyone know that they are an important part of the chapter.”

Kathy, a secondary language arts major who serves as chapter president of a mid-sized public university in the northeast notes that she has acquired delegation skills, learning that “You don’t have to always do everything on your own” and that she is now comfortable “letting others do their job and trusting in them that they will do it an follow through.” She adds that they also celebrate their successes together to build on their team approach.

Encourage the Heart

Very few enter teaching for extrinsic benefits. Being able to serve, lead, and make a profound difference in the lives of others characterizes the motivation of many pre-service teachers who are involved in the honorary chapters. As Kouzes and Posner (2007) note, it is vitally important to “celebrate the values and victories” of the organization (p. 307). Encouragement can go a long way in affirming the work of both the individual as well as the collective efforts of the team.

Encouragement can serve to revive and refresh a weary team member; as Sam, the president of a large northeast public university chapter reflects, “In order for those officers to become more involved, you have to make them feel successful… that they can really do it if they step up. I think sometimes for some of the officers, they are young. They are students. They are learning. I think if you help them feel that they can do it, then they are more apt to step up and do it.” This passion cannot be mandated, it must be conveyed through leadership. Chapter officers that foster shared leadership find power—and results—in encouraging and affirming the work of others.

Conclusion

Today’s leaders require skill sets that embody action and wisdom. As these student officers of exemplary chapters indicate, the skillsets learned and refined during their leadership work has shaped the success of their chapters and prepared them for their future roles as educators. The
“other curriculum” can indeed have a profound impact in shaping tomorrow’s leaders. These important outcomes have value for both the students as well as their future vocation as educational leaders. These leaders are already helping realize the Kappa Delta Pi mission of “promoting excellence and advancing scholarship, leadership, and service” in their pre-service years. By learning—and leading—they are acquiring the necessary skill sets to embrace the leadership challenges facing today’s educators.

Further studies could examine the participation of students in the honorary society. As Table I indicates, the participants were mostly white, female, elementary education majors. Why are secondary teaching candidates not represented in the chapters? Where are male and minority teaching candidates as it relates to participation in the chapters? Another aspect to perhaps study would be the size and scope of the chapters themselves. This study included small, liberal arts schools as well as larger universities. Does size matter? Finally, further longitudinal study might examine what impact, if any, chapter participation and chapter leadership participation has on teachers as they progress through the early novice teaching years and become a veteran teacher (Bond & Sterrett, 2012). These leaders have already embraced leadership challenges and have learned much in the “other curriculum” regarding leadership practices.

References


