Today's Students Need Leadership Training Like Never Before


In the last few years, leadership programs have sprung up in remarkable numbers at colleges and universities across the country. Institutions as diverse as Creighton University, Arizona State University, and Highland Community College, in Illinois, now offer leadership training and opportunities to their students. Some universities and colleges, like Gonzaga and the City University of Seattle, have developed degree programs in leadership, and many more such programs are being planned. It seems that every university Web page and presidential message now highlights leadership opportunities for students at both the undergraduate and graduate levels.

The idea is that leadership—like scientific disciplines, for example—consists of a set of skills, methodologies, and ideas that can be taught. The difference is that unlike, say, biology, leadership should inform all aspects of life. Leadership programs teach important life skills, such as introspection, cultural sensitivity, moral acuity, people skills, and decision-making acumen.

When leadership programs were first developed and introduced on campuses 20 years ago, they were at best marginal to the college or university's mission. They were situated in centers led by charismatic personalities, often retired public figures. Some programs, such as the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership, then housed at the University of Maryland, tried to carve out an academic home and to make a discipline out of leadership. But they were not taken seriously by the academic community, and many faded from view. Thousands of books, scholarly journals, and conferences aimed to professionalize the field, but still, leadership was not considered a serious discipline by others in higher education.

Part of the problem was its name; "leadership" is an amorphous term. Books on leadership, even serious ones, still get shelved with self-help books in many bookstores. Truth be told, most leadership books—or what are called leadership books—are nothing more than ego exercises for the author. It was and remains easy to dismiss a field that seems to include every chief executive, politician, motivational speaker, and baseball manager who ever wrote a book. And then there is the notion that true leaders are born, not made, and therefore leadership isn't worthy of academic study. Others worry that such programs offer a false promise to students—after all, not everyone can become a leader.
Nevertheless we are witnessing a growth in, and a new respect for, what we now call leadership studies. This is occurring in part because of the perception, at least, that America is suffering a crisis of leadership. In the weeks leading up to November's midterm elections, pundits bemoaned the loss of political visionaries. Recent articles in The Wall Street Journal, Bloomberg Businessweek, and The Harvard Business Review ask, Where have all the business leaders gone? Many business schools have incorporated leadership training into their programs, or even created stand-alone business-leadership programs. Some undergraduate colleges have embraced the trend by starting leadership programs, which function much like honors programs, or by changing honors programs into leadership programs. Most colleges and universities have incorporated civic engagement or service learning, which is enveloped in a language of leadership development.

So today, the task before us is twofold if we are going to embrace this trend. First, each institution needs to define leadership in a meaningful way before it can develop a meaningful curriculum for its students. A leadership program should be based on the values and mission of the university. If those values are not defined, or if the program does not follow them, students will be left with a mash-up of courses with conflicting purposes and nothing tying them together. I also worry about the rush to slap the "leadership" label on programs that are not really grounded in leadership studies.

Second, we cannot just provide the next generation with the pragmatic tools that this generation of leaders seems to lack, and call it a day. The skills students will need can't be so narrowly defined because by the time a student graduates, those tools may well be obsolete. Rather, students should learn how to recognize and develop such skills in themselves, what we refer to as lifelong learning.

Students are flocking to these programs because they recognize the importance of leadership in ways that older generations may not. Today's students are graduating into a world that is much riskier than the one we knew. We are beginning to recognize that our current economic crisis goes much deeper than the recent drop in the stock market. Our students will find themselves in what I call a micropreneurial age. They will have multiple jobs and even multiple careers during their lifetimes. Many will work for small firms, and a growing percentage will be consultants and freelancers for most of their working lives.

In short, they will need to be equipped to make their own opportunities. They need the skills, knowledge, and qualities that leadership programs cultivate: self-reliance, social and cultural capital, appreciation for lifelong learning, creativity, conflict-resolution and team-building skills, ethics, understanding of economics, and more. Leadership programs recognize that the career ladder of old is broken. In the past, companies could be counted on to develop leaders by ushering bright employees into management-training programs. Today such programs are few and far between. Colleges and universities must do the job.

We should stop snickering every time we hear the word "leadership" on campus and start recognizing the desire of many students to hone and professionalize skills that
will serve them long after graduation. Perhaps those skills were once instilled by corporate America or families. Now higher education is stepping up. Graduates of leadership programs may not be crowned leaders as soon as they get their diplomas, but ideally they will have the skills to lead tomorrow's generation and to thrive in the new economy.

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