

How does leadership education shape students' definitions of leadership? Insights from the Multi-institutional Study of Leadership

Eric K. Kaufman, John Thornton, & Jama Coartney
Virginia Tech

Abstract

The Multi-institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) is an international research program focused on understanding the influences of higher education in shaping socially responsible leadership capacity and other related student outcomes. While there have been numerous reports on the quantitative findings from the MSL, the published research tends to ignore data from the qualitative prompt: "Please provide a brief definition of what the term leadership means to you." By coding and categorizing those responses, we are able to explore the relationship between the students' definitions and their participation in leadership education program activities. This poster will highlight emerging findings from one institution's MSL data, including analysis of 1,570 definitions of leadership.

Introduction

The Multi-institutional Study of Leadership (MSL) is an international research program focused on understanding the influences of higher education in shaping socially responsible leadership capacity and other related student outcomes (Dugan, Kodama, & Correia, 2013; Dugan & Komives, 2007). The MSL covers more than 400 different variables, including questions about leadership efficacy, social perspective-taking, mentoring relationships, academic college experiences, formal leadership training experience, community service involvement, etc. Leadership educators may have particular interest in the open-ended survey question: "Please provide a brief definition of what the term leadership means to you." However, published findings from the MSL generally highlight only quantitative analyses. To integrate the qualitative data into the MSL analyses, we can consider models and schemes for coding the definitions and then analyzing the relationships with other variables.

Background

In *Leadership: A Very Short Introduction*, Grint (2010) introduces four definitions of leadership: leadership as position, leadership as person, leadership as result, and leadership as process. While Grint's framework captures different perspectives, they are not mutually exclusive. There are a variety of scholarly commentaries discussing the complexities of Grint's framework. For a practical overview, though, Webster (2013) offers a helpful summary:

- 1. Leadership as Position:** Position-based leadership assumes it is *where* people operate that makes them leaders. This view usually takes the form of authority in a formal hierarchy (e.g., the general or CEO). This definition implies that the character of the leader is less important than their position.

- 2. Leadership as Person:** This definition of leadership emphasizes the importance of the person's character. Person-based — or character-based — leadership says it is *who* you are that makes you a leader.
- 3. Leadership as Result:** With this definition of leadership we look at the results of leadership. Results-based leadership focuses on *what* leaders do.
- 4. Leadership as Process:** The process-based definition of leadership considers the relationship between leader and practice. It is what leaders *do* that matters.

The Leadership Identity Development (LID) model provided by Komives and colleagues (2005) suggests the growth of our identity as leaders evolves through six stages. While the scholars who created the model provide a variety of academic writings on the stages, Ballard (2014) offers a helpful summary in practical terms:

- 1. Awareness** – When we are children, we become aware that some people are called leaders. There are leaders in our culture, our community, our home. We develop the concept that some people are leaders.
- 2. Exploration/Engagement** – As we grow older, most children and teenagers become involved in groups. We become active participants or followers in various group activities. We begin to develop relational skills, learning to interact with others.
- 3. Leader Identified** – At this stage we recognize that some positions are for leaders. They direct us and get things done. Komives found high school students and some first year college students were at this stage.
- 4. Leadership Differentiated** – At some point we realize the position leader may or may not be the actual leader. We realize leadership can emerge from followers. We enhance our group skills and participate more actively in group decisions. People who are already in formal leadership roles may feel empowered by their growing awareness of leadership and its possibilities.
- 5. Generality** – We move beyond awareness of leadership processes to a larger sense of responsibility to the greater good. Leaders may become more compassionate and caring.
- 6. Integration/Synthesis** – We know we are leaders, we have the capacity to lead, and we seek opportunities for self-improvement as a natural part of our lives.

Description of program, research, or methodology

This poster will highlight findings from one institution's data collected as part of the 2015 MSL. The total number of respondents for this sample was 1,686 college students. Of those, 1,570 provide an answer to the request for a definition of leadership. The research team coded the collected definitions using Grint's (2010) framework for definitions of leadership, as well as Komives and colleagues' (2005) Leadership Identity Development (LID) model. Two researchers independently coded the first 100 definitions, counted the discrepancies in ratings and calculated the inter-rater reliability to be 83%, which we considered sufficient for this exploratory research. After the leadership definitions were coded, we used SPSS to calculate descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations, focusing particularly on the MSL variables associated with Leadership Education.

Current results

Based on coding of definitions from one institution's MSL respondents (n=1,570), we identify the dominant perspective within Grint's (2010) framework as "leadership as process" (71%, n=1,122). The other areas are "leadership as person" (29%, n=458), "leadership as result" (24%, n=375), and "leadership as position" (20%, n=314). Related to the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model provided Komives and colleagues (2005), the dominant stage is level 4, "leadership differentiated" (95%, n=1,497). The next most common LID stage identified was level 5, "generativity" (4%, n=62). For examples of leadership definitions associated with each category, see Table 1.

As we consider the relationship between leadership definitions and leadership experiences, we explored bivariate correlations between the coded definitions and students' leadership development experiences while in college. Preliminary analysis reveals significant correlations with the following variables:

- Since starting college, have you ever participated in a leadership training or leadership education experience of any kind (ex: leadership conference, alternative spring break, leadership course, club president's retreat)? (ENV10)
- Since starting college, to what degree have you been involved in the following types of leadership training or education?
 - Leadership Conference (ENV10A1)
 - Leadership Retreat (ENV10A2)
 - Leadership Lecture/Workshop Series (ENV10A4)
 - Positional Leader Training (ex. Treasurer's training, Resident Assistant training, Student Government training) (ENV10A5)
 - Leadership Course (ENV10A7)
 - Living-Learning Leadership Program (ENV10A12)
 - Women's Leadership Program (ENV10A15)
- Leadership Minor - Since starting college, have you been involved in the following types of leadership training or education? (ENV10A8)

Conclusions/Recommendations

Our classification of the leadership definitions reflects what scholars might expect, based on what has already been revealed in the literature about the two frameworks. The coded definitions may be most valuable for considering the relationship with other variables. Although correlations do not convey causation, the relationships between leader development activities and students' definitions of leadership should be of interest to leadership educators. Additional analysis is warranted to uncover the most important predictors of a student's definition of leadership. This poster presentation can be a catalyst for conversations about practical considerations and ideas for future research.

Table 1

Sample leadership definitions and their relationship to Grint's (2010) approaches to leadership, as well as the Leadership Identity Development (LID) model provided Komives and colleagues (2005).

Leadership Definition	Approach to Leadership				LID
	Position	Person	Result	Process	Stage
“To me leadership is being able to bring people together to collectively reach an agreed upon goal. To inspire and encourage individuals and the group as a whole and to embrace differences within that collective. A leader should be approachable by colleges [sic] but firm with the power to make final decisions that has been appointed to them.”	X	X	X	X	4
“Set the standard by example. Push others to do better and be better, while also pushing yourself. Getting done what needs to get done.”		X	X	X	4
“Motivating and guiding yourself or a group through and obstacle or challenge to the end goal.”			X	X	4
“Coordinating others.”				X	3
“How one person influences others to a greater common good.”				X	5
“I think leadership is something learned over time and while theories and can be taught, an effective leader has years of experience of both leading and following.”				X	6
“Leadership is recognizing a goal and working to bring you and your team there.”			X		4
“Joining people's talents and efforts to positively and effectively accomplish a goal.”			X		4
“A person who inspires others through either direct or indirect contact and sets an example for others to follow.”		X			4
“Demonstrating exemplary qualities that instill trust in those who follow you.”		X			4
“In simplest terms, being followed by others.”	X				4
“The position or function of a leader; a person who guides or directs a group.”	X				4

References

- Ballard, J. (2014). Leader Identity Development: Not Just for Colleges and Universities. Retrieved from <http://www.johnballardphd.com/blog/leader-identity-development-not-just-for-colleges-and-universities>
- Dugan, J. P., Kodama, C., & Correia, B. (2013). Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership insight report: Leadership program delivery. *College Park, MD: National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs.*

Dugan, J. P., & Komives, S. R. (2007). Developing leadership capacity in college students. *College Park, MD: National Clearinghouse for Leadership Programs.*

Grint, K. (2010). *Leadership: A very short introduction* (Vol. 237). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Komives, S. R., Owen, J. E., Longersbeam, S. D., Mainella, F. C., & Osteen, L. (2005). Developing a leadership identity: A grounded theory. *Journal of College Student Development*, 46(6), 593-611.

Webster, M. (2013). 4 Different Approaches to Leadership — A Definition of Leadership. Retrieved from <http://www.leadershipthoughts.com/definition-of-leadership/>