

Who's in charge of a residential college?

Student-led seminars as an example of followership in action

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Case Study

In 2011, Virginia Tech opened its first residential college, a place “where undergraduates, graduate students and faculty could live together in a facility dedicated to learning” (Johnson, 2011). As articulated by Frank Shushok, associate vice president for student affairs, “The residential college reflects all aspects of student learning.... It touches intellectual life, social life, and contemplative life. It gives students a space they can govern themselves, in collaboration with faculty and student affairs personnel” (DeLauder, 2010). The newly created Honors Residential College (HRC) includes 320 Junior Fellows, who are undergraduate students in the University Honors program, as well as over thirty Senior Fellows, composed of faculty, staff, and community members. The HRC accommodates nearly three times as many students as the previous Honors-designated residence halls. So, while the HRC could benefit from some existing structure and standards, the new community required a different approach.

University Honors requires all residents in Honors housing to participate in a one-credit seminar, each semester they live in the community. For the first two years of the HRC, the faculty administration tried to continue the “Colloquium Magnum” format of the seminars that existed in other Honors living-learning communities. Although the Colloquium Magnums were generally student-led, they relied upon regular interaction with academic faculty to ensure rigor, and the larger community made faculty oversight more difficult. So, in year three of the HRC, the Director of University Honors, Terry Papillon, mandated a change to a more structured seminar with mandated reading and writing assignments. The approach related in part to

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Papillon's desire that the HRC "be very intentional and very intense with how it encourages students to grow and broaden" (DeLauder, 2010). The syllabus described the seminar as follows:

The Honors Residential College Seminar (HRCS), which is replacing Colloquium Magnum, lies at the core of the academic mission of honors in the residential college model and serves two important purposes: it brings Junior Fellows together in community, and it provides a forum to hone your reading, writing, and debate skills.

These are both key goals of University Honors. These common core readings serve to unify conversation and community. It is our goal that conversations about these readings and topics will spill outside the parameters of HRCS and lead to long discussions over dinner, intense arguments late at night in lounges, and blog posts that provoke online conversations and debates.

While the Honors administrators were hopeful the new structure would achieve the desired results, the Junior Fellows (a.k.a. students) expressed dismay and frustration with the heavy-handed approach. The backlash from the Junior Fellows was so extreme that the administration took the unprecedented approach of allowing the seminar to be optional during the second semester of that academic year. They acknowledged the need to revamp the seminar structure and worked with students to develop a new plan. Whereas the prior year's effort to improve the seminar was authoritative, the administration resolved to be more inclusive. This began by hosting a series of town hall style meetings that focused on the following questions:

- What is and isn't working? Do you have a sense of why?

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- Honors students are capable of holding high-level discussions without a faculty member guiding them—what do you need in order to do this?
- Keeping in mind that the courses represent honors and university credit—how can we ensure that work done in these courses is deserving of this credit?

The fellows who participated in these meetings were able to share their perceptions and suggest new changes and structures, but they also identified more questions to ponder. The HRC's director of academic enrichment (a student-elected position) accepted the challenge to improve the seminars for the next academic year and solicited a student committee to join him in the design process. In cooperation with the faculty principal (the HRC's live-in academic faculty leader), the committee engaged in several video conference calls throughout the summer, allowing student committee members to participate from geographic locations around the world. The committee developed consensus around the following course description:

The Community and Discussion Seminar (CaDS) is designed to encourage communication, collaboration, and connectivity among fellows of the HRC. Throughout this course you will be tasked with improving your discussion and debate skills through presentation, facilitated discussion, and a group project to be showcased late in the semester.

The syllabus describes the course format as follows:

The course is designed to be student led. So, although we have identified an instructor of record and teaching assistant in this syllabus, don't be surprised when we are not present for the meetings of your individual section. What we will do is help provide the appropriate structure and answer questions that surface. Each section will select a "moderator" that can manage some of the logistics and serve as a point-person for

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communication between the instructor(s) and the group/section. The moderator is NOT responsible for leading the discussion each week; instead, the discussion leader role will rotate among all Junior Fellows enrolled in the section.

In addition, the syllabus offers the following guidance for the discussion facilitator role:

Each week, the discussion facilitator should introduce a topic and facilitate discussion surrounding that topic. The format is far from rigid; the desire is to allow individuals enough leeway to craft exciting experiences that will both interest their peers and provoke academic discussion. After choosing a topic, the discussion facilitator should prime the discussion by posting in the online discussion forum at least three days before the next meeting. The class meeting should begin with a 5-10 minute introduction that sparks dialogue between the presenter and participants. The discussion facilitator is then responsible for guiding conversation through the remainder of the hour-long class meeting.

Students have appreciated the empowerment that occurs with the new approach. One student wrote, “This has been the best experience I have had with an honors dorm-related class since the beginning of the HRC, and I think a big part of that is how the class was organized.”

Commentary

“A living-learning community expands the potential for learning because it consists of curricular and co-curricular learning opportunities” (Grohs, Keith, Morikawa, Penven, & Stephens, 2013, p. 41). Although the residential college model promotes close faculty interaction, a fundamental advantage of the residential college system is “the way students in the colleges educate one another” (Ryan, 2001, p. 24). This is a shift from traditional approaches to

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leadership. In response, we need to consider the potential of emerging discourses of leadership and ways to facilitate appropriate interactions.

The Eco-Leadership Discourse

Reflecting on a century of leadership literature, Western (2007) identified an emerging “eco-leader discourse” that is characterized by collective decision-making, collaboration, shared leadership, and grassroots organization. It “shifts the focus from individual leaders to leadership” (Western, 2010, p. 36), blurring the lines between leader and follower. Positional leaders are encouraged to “assist in the emergence of leadership rather than creating change through executive orders and decisions” (Wielkiewicz & Stelzner, 2005, p. 331). This new eco-leadership approach gives a larger number of stakeholders a stronger voice, creating the potential for both better decisions and greater commitment to those decisions (Allen, Stelzner, & Wielkiewicz, 1999). This is what occurred with the Honors Residential College (HRC) seminar. Immediately prior to the current seminar format, the University Honors Director mandated a new format that clearly dictated both content and format. The students rebelled against the “executive orders” and were motivated to contribute to the leadership process in ways they had never done before. The followership in action has clearly resulted in the eco-leadership identified by Western (2007).

These premises of eco-leadership are changing the way leadership is conceived and taught. Instead of the “Great Man” theories, with leaders that were seen as controllers, therapists, or messiahs, which tended to centralize power as a sign of structural strength, this new approach sees power at the margins as beneficial (Western, 2010). “Eco-leadership shifts the power from individual leaders to leadership... in an attempt to harness the energy and creativity of the whole system” (Western, 2010, p. 44). Rather than focusing on leader created change, eco-leadership

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focuses on “a reciprocal relationship between leadership and its environment. It decenters individuals and challenges centralized power, claiming that by creating the right culture and conditions, leadership will emerge in plural forms and unexpected places” (Western, 2010, p. 36). What remains to be seen, though, is how to structure the environment in a way that optimizes the potential for eco-leadership. For that, we can turn to the Obreau Tripod.

Obreau Tripod

The Obreau Tripod is a structure for helping groups and individuals work through challenging conversations. "Obreau" is a composite of the first two letters of three guiding words: Observation, Reasonableness, and Authenticity. “The tripod is designed as an aid in preparing for and engaging in conversations that bring to bear the greatest possible range and depth of intelligence on an issue, and specifically to prevent the slide into the default patterns of reactive thinking, negative judgment, and dancing around” (Dunoon, 2014, pp. 20-21). The first leg of the Tripod, Working from Observation, is intended as a counterpoint to the common default behavior of reacting to new information or experience. When we work from what we observe or hear directly, we help keep ourselves open to different meanings - as well as minimize the threat associated with talking about difficult issues. The second leg of the Tripod, Attributing Reasonableness, requires imagining what the issue might "look like" to others from where they sit. We all bring our mindsets to conversations, and having some awareness of these helps us gain a more rounded, holistic appreciation of an issue. The third leg of the Tripod, Speaking Authentically, means that we say what is true for us AND that connects with our observations (the first Tripod leg) AND that reflects an assumption that the others involved are capable of reasonableness (the second Tripod leg). This Tripod leg helps us overcome a

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common default behavior of "dancing around": speaking in euphemisms, avoiding or sugar-coating the difficult topics, and holding back on what we would like to say (Dunoon, 2014).

The Obreau Tripod appears to be a useful tool for engaging eco-leadership and a natural fit for structuring student-led conversations within the Honors Residential College's Community and Discussion Seminars. Benefits include:

- Introducing a level of structure to help sort through the messiness of virtually any thorny issue,
- Bringing a degree of clarity to what otherwise can seem an intractable problem,
- Promoting creativity by enabling new ways to frame an issue,
- Reducing the risks and threat of speaking up, and
- Strengthening the capacity of users to build shared understandings with others (Dunoon, 2015).

With the Obreau Tripod as a foundation for face-to-face discussion, a final consideration is the opportunity to build upon this through writing.

Online Discussion Forum

As reported by Comer and Lenaghan (2013), "students' active engagement with one another in the application of course material enhances their acquisition of course concepts" (p. 264), and that potential is even greater when supplementing with online communication.

According to Berger (1999), "electronic communication free[s students] to be more revealing and to participate more than in the typical classroom setting" (p. 689). In fact, research suggests that that students' online discussion can be better than face-to-face discussions for fostering ideas, interaction, and in-depth consideration of others' viewpoints (Rainsbury & Malcolm, 2003). Educational researchers speculate that the benefit from asynchronous discussions comes

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from the added time students have to reflect on what they want to convey (Berry, 2005).

However, discussion forums without clear expectations can lead to low-quality, high-quantity posts that are both unproductive and overwhelming (Rollag, 2010). Comer and Lenaghan (2013) encourage a strategy that ensures students:

- “1. apply course concepts to their own experience in ways that provoke meaningful discussion about course material,
2. analyze classmates' posts to provide useful advice or solutions, and
3. evaluate classmates posts by critiquing them” (p. 265).

To accomplish this, Comer and Lenaghan (2013) propose a strategy involving a balance of original examples (OEs) and value-added comments (VACs).

The Honors Residential College's Community and Discussion Seminars incorporated this guidance for electronic communication, requiring students to contribute to an online discussion forum between the weekly face-to-face meetings. The assigned/selected presenter was instructed to begin the discussion with an "original post" that meets the following criteria:

- **Multifaceted:** The original post must present an issue that can be debated from several angles.
- **Original:** The topic must be different from other topics presented.
- **Unbiased:** At least two sources must be posted, and at least one source must be text-based.
- **Depth:** The topic must be presented with at least five sentences.

Then, all other participants were asked to contribute "value-added comments" that meet the following criteria:

- **Pertinent:** Relates to the topic being discussed.

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- **Original:** Synthesize what others have said without repeating others' posts.
- **Insight:** Well thought-out and adds to the discussion.
- **Depth:** At least five well-composed sentences.
- **Respect:** Must respect the opinions of fellow students.

In this way, the students' engagement in followership was not a passive role but an active adoption of eco-leadership, blurring the lines between leader and follower.

Discussion Questions

- 1) A review of the leadership literature reveals "the majority of leadership theories and studies have tended to emphasize the personal background, personality traits, perceptions, and actions of leaders" (Shamir, 2007, p. x). In what way(s) is the case of the Honors Residential College's Community and Discussion Seminar different? In what ways is it the same?
- 2) Shamir (2007) argues for "a balanced perspective on leadership, one that is neither entirely leader-centered nor entirely follower-centered, but views both leaders and followers as co-producers of the leadership relationship and its consequences" (p. xi-xii). Does the case of the Honors Residential College's Community and Discussion Seminar reflect a balanced approach? What evidence supports your conclusion?
- 3) Some scholars argue for a "shared leadership approach [that] is neither leader-centered nor follower-centered because it rejects the distinction between leaders and followers" (Shamir, 2007, p. xvii). Does the case of the Honors Residential College's Community and Discussion Seminar reflect a shared leadership approach? What evidence supports your conclusion?

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- 4) In what ways does the eco-leaders discourse identified by Western (2007) enhance our understanding of the successful emergence of the Honors Residential College's Community and Discussion Seminar?
- 5) Some scholars have investigated the notion of "leaderless work groups" but conclude that "humans still need direction, control, rules, hierarchy, predictability, routine, and so on" (Jackson & Parry, 2011, p. 108). In what way might Dunoon's (2014) Obreau Tripod provide the necessary structure? What about the online discussion forum?
- 6) As Jackson and Parry (2011) conclude their review of critical and distributed perspectives on leadership, they argue "groups cannot do without a formal leader, but team leadership reduces the pressure on the formal leader to produce all of the leadership" (p. 110). How does this perspective relate to the Honors Residential College's Community and Discussion Seminar?

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