

Feasibility of an Undergraduate Leadership Studies Program at Florida Atlantic University

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Abstract. This paper explores the feasibility for an undergraduate leadership studies program to be established at Florida Atlantic University (FAU). Insight was obtained through focus groups and phone interviews to help explore the level of interest there is for a leadership studies program at FAU, along with helping gauge what worked best at other institutions that have established leadership studies programs on their campuses. We gained information by asking students what they believe are three skills and attributes of an effective leader and were able to discover that communication, motivation and honesty were the most prevalent. When we asked students what had benefitted them the most in the Introduction to Leadership course (LDR 2010) and what benefits could come from a leadership studies program, they stated that the top benefits were real world application and career goals. Finally, when asking about the level of interest in having a program on campus, we found there was an overall interest from the students. We also spoke with individuals who serve as coordinators for leadership programs at four institutions similar to FAU's structure in the sense that it is a public, state funded university. By speaking to these individuals, we were able to gauge what is working for their leadership programs and how they structured the programs in terms of credits and where the program is housed. With the data we collected, we saw there is in fact a desire for establishing a leadership studies program at FAU, with an emphasis on making it interdisciplinary.

Introduction

Helping students develop the integrity and strength of character that prepares them for leadership may be one of the most challenging and important goals of higher education" (King, 1997, p.87). The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education states that "regardless of differences in academic discipline, organizational affiliation, cultural background, or geographical location, students must be better prepared to serve as citizen leaders in a global community" (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2012, p. 2). The Office of Student Involvement and Leadership (SIL) has played an integral part in educating students on effective leadership practices and presenting opportunities for them to expand and develop as student leaders. Within the last two years, SIL has seen a 37% increase in student participation and expansion of new programs (Florida Atlantic University, 2013).

The department uses The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership model formulated by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner for their annual student leadership conference, which is one of the largest leadership programs offered. The authors express that "though each student leader is a unique individual, there are shared patterns to the practice of leadership. And these practices can be learned" (Kouzes & Posner, 2008, p. 4). The concept that leadership can be learned in the classroom came to life at FAU in the spring of 2013 when SIL, in joint efforts with the Division of Student Affairs and the College of Education, launched the first sections of LDR 2010: Introduction to Leadership. This course exposes students to the basic foundation of leadership and its application to college experiences in student leadership roles. In its first semester, there were only five sections of the course and by the Fall 2013 semester that number had increased to nine sections. This

course has been integrated into the Certified Student Leader Program, an already existing initiative offered by SIL, to serve as a more formalized training program in its broader curriculum toward fulfillment of the first requirement to receive certification as a Certified Student Leader. These initiatives serve as a catalyst to the development of an undergraduate leadership studies program.

Currently, FAU does not offer an undergraduate leadership studies program. Many institutions within Florida and across the nation have already established a leadership minor or leadership certificate program. In a recent article looking at measuring student leadership, Barry Posner notes that “leadership development is now an integral part of the educational program of college students” (Posner, 2012, p. 1). In exploring the ways to provide students with skills and education that will help them be more effective leaders during their time in college and after, the research considers the feasibility of adding a leadership studies program to FAU’s academic offerings. Additionally, research indicates that students can and do increase their leadership skills during their college years (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). The purpose of this research was to interpret to what degree there is an interest for a leadership minor at Florida Atlantic University, and to gain insight regarding the actual development and structure of the program. More specifically, we sought to explore what students see as three skills and attributes of an effective leader, how the LDR 2010 course has assisted them in their leadership pursuits, the structure that the future program could entail, and the benefits this training could provide the students during and after college. We also looked to other universities to provide details regarding their process to form and maintain the leadership studies programs on their campuses.

Methodology

The methodology that was used for this research was qualitative. The methods that were used included focus groups with student leaders on campus and phone interviews with coordina-

tors of leadership studies programs at public institutions that showcase a variety of program structures.

Focus Groups

To carry out the data collection we held eight focus groups made up of various student leaders on campus. The student leader pool consisted of leadership ambassadors, orientation leaders, resident assistants, members of athletics, and students who have taken the LDR 2010 course. These student leaders were recruited via email, signed consent forms, and were notified that their participation was entirely voluntary. The student sample population ages ranged from 18 to 26 years and were made up of both female and male students. In total, 64 students were surveyed within the eight focus groups.

The execution of the focus groups started with an introduction to the students of our research team and the purpose for doing this research. Each student was given a consent form to sign as the sections were quickly briefed. Once the forms were signed the focus group began by the authors going through the research questions and having students who volunteered and consented answer the questions. Other research team members took notes in each of the groups to collect the data. Once all the research questions were asked, the floor was opened for questions from the participants. At the conclusion of the focus group the participants were informed again of the purpose of the research and contact information was given in case they wanted to hear more about the research or had any further questions.

Phone Interviews

To carry out this portion of the data collection, phone interviews were held with coordinators of four public universities that already have a leadership studies program established at their respective institutions. These individuals had each been a key member of developing their programs and/or are currently helping manage the program on a daily basis. Both male and female individuals comprised the sample population in these interviews and all are professional staff members or instructors at their respective university. The execution of these phone interviews started by emailing time slots of availability to

the coordinators and scheduling a time to speak with them over the phone. During the interview, the research team presented the purpose of the research and the main goal of interviewing them for the research project. Each individual was asked the same set of questions concerning the structure of their leadership program, how it was developed, and what college or department the program is currently located. All of the answers were recorded by hand or typed by members of our research team. At the conclusion, any other clarifying questions were asked and the interviewee was asked if they had any further questions for the team. They were then thanked for their time and information to help the pursuit of developing a program on our campus.

Results

The results of this study are presented below, organized by data collection type and then by research question. Results were then compared to the leadership studies work of Kouzes and Posner (2008).

Focus Group Findings

What are the three skills and attributes of an effective leader?

This question was asked as way to gauge what students see in leaders. In creating a leadership studies program, it is important to note what attributes and skills students see as effective and to look to incorporate that in some way, shape, or form in the curriculum. According to a Wordle, a



Figure 1 Wordle of skills and attributes of an effective leader as reported by student leader participants in this study.

word cloud compilation that graphically represents data by increasing the size of words by frequency of use in text (see Figure 1), the four most mentioned skills and attributes were communication, honesty, motivation, and humility. The most frequently noted skill, communication, was described by students as being vital when working with others in a group or team setting to accomplish something. This showcases “an insight that all exemplary student leaders share: Vision comes from relationships with others” (Kouzes & Posner, 2008, p. 50).

How has the LDR 2010 course assisted students in their leadership pursuits? What do students believe could be the benefits of having a minor in leadership studies?

We asked students to explain to us the benefits of taking the LDR 2010 course and what they believe could be the benefits of having a leadership minor at FAU. During the focus groups, we found that what students felt assisted them in their leadership pursuits also was a foreseen benefit of having a leadership minor, as seen in Figure 2. Students stated that real world application, gaining perspective on leadership theories, personal development, and developing effective communication skills were all key benefits. The authors of the textbook used in the Introduction to Leadership course state that “effective leaders know what they do best and apply their strengths in all aspect of their lives” (Komives, Lucas, & McMahon, 2013, p. 164). More specifically, a large number of students felt that the StrengthsFinder (an online assessment, www.strengths.gallup.com, used to highlight a person’s strengths and strategies for applying their strengths) component of the course was most useful to them in understanding themselves as leaders.

To what degree is there an interest for a leadership minor here at FAU?

When asking this particular question, we listed all potential options (highly interested, somewhat interested, and not interested) and then had students raise their hand for their selection. Only 9% of the sample population was “not interested” as seen in Figure 3. Many students expressed their lack of interest for the potential of a leadership minor was due to the fact that they

would be graduating in the upcoming semesters. The other 91% of the student sample population

was highly or somewhat interested in having a leadership minor.

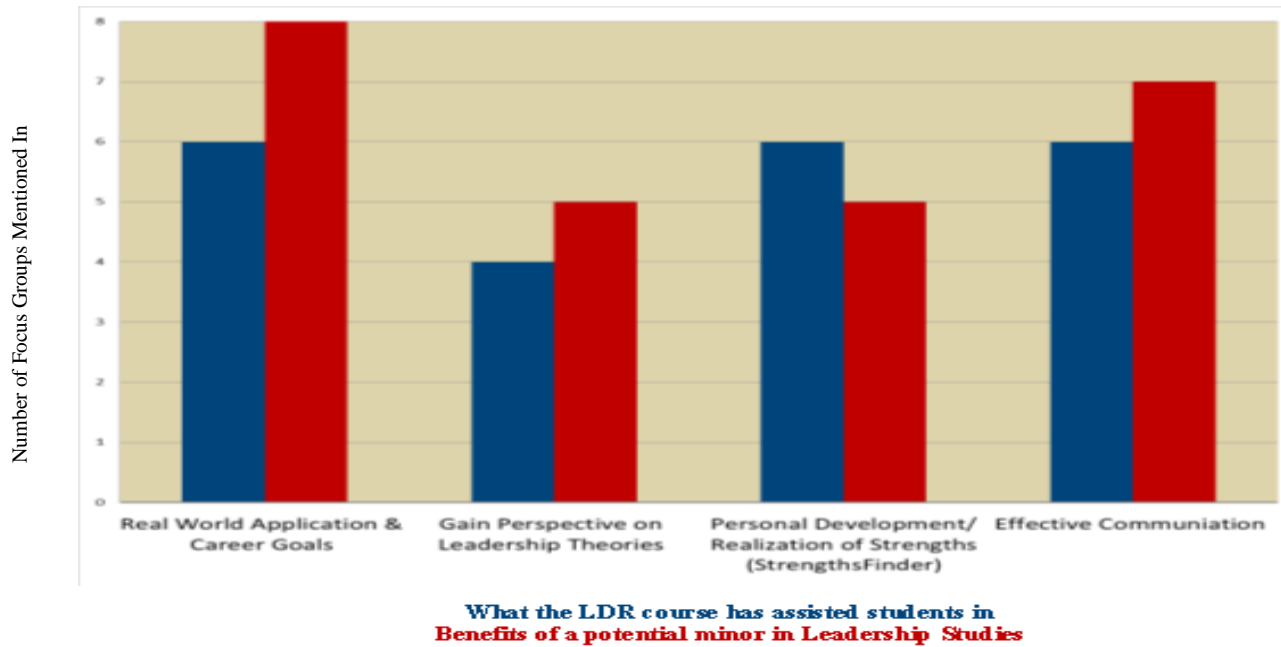


Figure 2 Bar graph of what students stated as benefits of the LDR course and having a leadership minor.

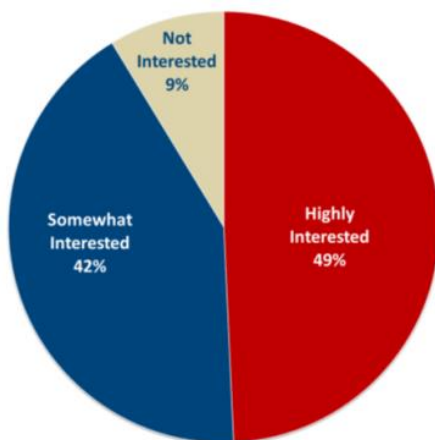


Figure 3 Pie chart of showing level of interest in having a leadership minor at FAU.

Phone Interview Findings

How did other institutions develop their leadership studies program? Figure 4 [on page 32] serves as a summation of the data gathered from four public institutions that have implemented a leadership studies program. The individuals interviewed at these institutions are cur-

rently involved with the coordination and management of the program on their campus. When compiling background information, we created a spreadsheet database of all the schools that had leadership studies programs and then requested interviews. The four institutions' responses follow below.

At Florida State University they currently have a certificate program. "The Undergraduate Certificate in Leadership Studies is an 18 credit, interdisciplinary, multidimensional, and experiential program open to all Florida State Undergraduate students" (The Center for Leadership and Social Change, Florida State University, n.d., para. 1). Advising for this program comes from the Center for Leadership and Social Change at FSU. The development of the program came about when the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) made the recommendation to the university as a way to merge academics and leadership. Following the SACS recommendation, the program was created in a time span of one year. While their program is not based around

any one particular theoretical framework, they base their curriculum around four contexts; individual, partnership, groups, and community. Their concerns with the program have been the influx of students and the inability to afford instructors to teach leadership courses.

At University of South Florida (USF) they currently have a leadership minor. “The Leadership Studies Program is interdisciplinary in nature and is a significant benefit to students in all areas of study” (Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement, University of South Florida, n.d., para. 1). Advising for this program comes from the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement at USF. The program has been at USF for 14 years, has remained steadfast, and is growing. The Dean of Undergraduate Studies and the Director of Leadership and Civic Engagement, at the time, had the vision to create the program and it took them a year and a half to implement it and offer it to students. Their curriculum is based on the framework of the Social Change Model by Susan Komives. Their main concern with the program is locating funding to pay for adjunct professors.

At the University of Central Florida (UCF) they currently have a leadership minor. “The Leadership Studies (LS) minor focuses on specific aspects of leadership involving communication, collaboration, social relations, politics, and ethics” (The Leadership Studies Program, The University of Central Florida, 2008, para. 1). The Leadership Minor is actually the 17th largest minor at UCF and is housed in the Interdisciplinary Studies Department (Faculty in Student Leadership Development, telephone interview, Feb. 24, 2014). Advising comes from one advisor who is split between interdisciplinary studies and student affairs. Leadership courses have been taught at UCF since 1995. Their LEAD Scholars program was the first step towards the creation of the minor. The program came into development due to collaboration between the faculty senate and various deans across campus. Their curriculum is also based on the theoretical framework of the Social Change Model. The main concern with this program is the funding aspect in regards to paying adjunct faculty.

At Iowa State University they currently offer a leadership certificate. “This interdisciplinary certificate program utilizes university courses offered in a variety of academic disciplines to

provide a strong foundation and appropriate experiences for undergraduate students who plan to become community leaders and engage in public service—regardless of their profession—in the public, nonprofit or private sectors” (Iowa State University, 2014, para. 1). Advising for this program occurs with a student’s own academic advisor in their college. Advising is also offered from the Catt Center for Women and Politics. The program consists of 21 credits. It took a total of five years for the program to be offered to students. Four years were spent compiling the proposal and then once it was submitted the approval process took one year. This curriculum is based around the theoretical framework of the Social Change Model as well. The main concern with the maintenance of this program is they currently do not have a leadership studies department and their instructors are all temporary.

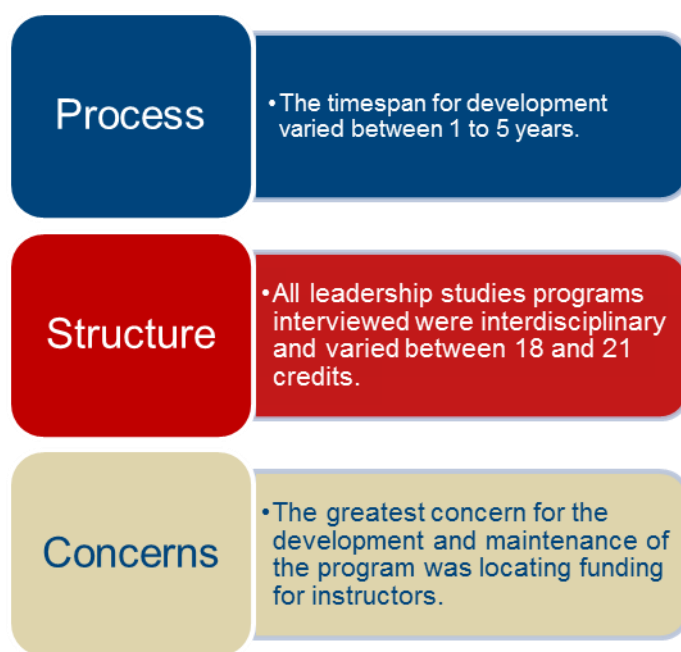


Figure 4 Summation of data collected from phone interviews.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the focus groups, it can be concluded that the participating students showed an overall interest in having a leadership studies program developed at FAU. It is said by Kouzes and Posner (2008) that “leadership is an

identifiable set of skills and abilities that are available to everyone” (p. 3). With leadership education opportunities offered from several colleges of the university, it is appropriate and beneficial that it is made even more accessible to all students by a leadership studies program on campus that is not centered around one discipline, but rather, is interdisciplinary in nature. Already having an existing introductory course (LDR2010) on campus, the students said that it has been beneficial to their leadership pursuits so far; therefore, having more classes available through a leadership studies program can lead to more benefits to students. This gave the researchers great insight into students’ perspectives on leadership development and showed what the students are getting out of the introductory course currently, as well as what they project students could get out of a larger leadership studies program.

The information gathered from the other universities surveyed over the telephone gave the researchers perspective on how to structure a program at FAU in terms of how many credits to include, how long it could take to develop a program, and what general concerns might arise in maintenance of a program (Detailed in Figure 4). The results also provided insight into potential future steps for research and program development by exploring the many varieties of leadership studies programs in existence and gaining first hand feedback from the program coordinators.

Now that the preliminary research has been completed the next steps toward designing a leadership studies program can begin. Based on our findings that show the favor of a leadership studies program to be created at FAU, and the literature that indicates the expansion of curricular leadership programs to over 1,000 nationally (Dungan & Komives, 2012, p. 6), it is our conclusion that we move forward with developing a full program proposal to establish a leadership studies program at FAU. The academic home that is being considered to house this new program is the Higher Education Leadership Department in the College of Education. In order to do this and move into implementing this program at FAU, it is necessary to engage in conversations with faculty in a second phase of this research initiative. As FAU President, Dr. John Kelly, stated in an interview with Michael Williams from WPTV,

“the business community is always looking for more than just the book knowledge, they are looking for kids [students] who understand how to work in teams, and they are looking for kids [students] who exhibit leadership skills, problem-solving skills...” (WPTV Channel 5, 2014) and he wants to see implementation of more of these skills at FAU. This shows the need and desire for leadership skill development at FAU from senior leadership. “Leadership is everyone’s business” (Kouzes & Posner, 2008, p. 21), and having a leadership studies program at FAU will allow that notion to be learned, understood, and practiced by students of all walks of life so that they can see leadership through different eyes and become a more effective leader themselves. The standards set by Council of Achievement Standards in Higher Education say that “because students experience leadership in many different settings- in and out of the classroom, on and off campus, through social media, virtually every student engages in some type of activity that involves the practice of leadership” (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2012, p. 2). Leadership is a practice that every student exhibits, whether it is evident or not, and all students have the potential to improve their leadership skills and be more effective. This research showcases the desire to bridge the gap between existing leadership education and academics at FAU.

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