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Owning Honors: Outcomes for a Student Leadership Culture

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Abstract: The author provides an overview of a peer mentorship program within an honors curriculum and an assessment of its leadership culture. This culture is based on the values of servant leadership and an inclusive community of learners, and it is promoted through an orientation, training, and robust extracurricular component. The author explores the efficacy of leadership culture, considering its influence on peer mentors' identification with the honors community and its influence on their learning outcomes.

Keywords: educational innovation; student leadership; peer mentorship; community belonging; Purdue University Honors College

INTRODUCTION

Identifying and selecting students with the right stuff for honors are clearly important, and selection alone can seem sufficient for membership in an honors community. Nancy Stanlick (2006) provides a compelling counterpoint: "To gain entrance into and be present in an organization or community are not sufficient, however, to characterize a person as a complete member of it"; instead, "[t]o be a member of a community is also to perform actions and develop or possess traits of character consistent with those actions" (75). While Stanlick focuses on honor as an active moral notion, this sentiment should apply equally to student leaders who perform actions consistent with the mission of their honors institutions. Students in the honors mentor program at the Purdue University Honors College perform such actions by empowering others and cultivating inclusive communities that support

learning. The assessment outlined below provides evidence that these actions do indeed foster a stronger sense of membership within an honors community and a stronger commitment to its educational values. Furthermore, such social outcomes, I argue, are not distinct from leadership learning outcomes but are rather interconnected with them.

The deep connection between honors and leadership development almost goes without saying. Honors students are often defined by their high intellectual achievement as well as their motivation to take on leadership roles (Achterberg, 2005; Kaczvinsky, 2007). For this reason, Keith Garbutt (2006) claims that one of the core responsibilities of honors institutions is to provide students “with an environment in which they can develop their skills and potential as leaders” (45). Betsy Greenleaf Yarrison (2018) similarly argues that “honors programs exist to educate our future leaders” (31). Chicoine and Nichols (2015) as well as Mellow and Koh (2015) write confidently that the “honors experience develops tomorrow’s leaders” and that the “community of support” at stake in honors institutions ensures that “our students become leaders” (Chicoine & Nichols, 126; Mellow & Koh, 65). By embracing this responsibility, honors educators are creating important opportunities for high-ability students to become vocational, civic, and global leaders (Dotter, 2019; Kaplowitz, 2017; Scott, 2017).

The efficacy of leadership programs in cultivating relevant skills has been well documented. Multi-institutional studies on student leadership as well as more narrow studies on particular peer leadership programs have shown that such experiences can improve students’ leadership skills, including communication, organization, collaboration, community orientation, civic responsibility, and sense of leadership efficacy (Colvin & Ashman, 2010; Dugan & Komives, 2007; Ender & Newton, 2010; Harmon, 2006; Kezar & Moriarty, 2000; Shook & Keup, 2012; Zimmerman-Oster & Burkhardt, 1999). As studies continue to assert the developmental value of student leadership programs, so do institutions continue to proliferate a wide variety of student leadership models.

This proliferation has certainly been the case within honors institutions. Honors models of student leadership include student co-leaders in class discussions (Bedetti, 2017; Vassiliou, 2008); peer instructors for first-year courses (Leichliter, 2013; Johnson, 2009); peer mentors for first-year orientation retreats (Walters & Kanak, 2016); and other types of peer mentors and ambassadors whose purpose is to support students through the transition to college and promote the traditions and values of their honors institutions

(Brady, Elnagar, and Miller 2010; Dubroy & Leathers, 2015; Koch & Klingshirn, 2015; Leichliter, 2013). Each of these authors reinforces the various ways that “[s]tudent leadership is important to fostering the goals of honors education” (Brady et al., 2010, 144). As Walters and Kanak (2016) suggest, student leaders establish “a sense of belonging” for other honors students (61). They also prove instrumental in shaping how others perceive their honors institutions and communities (Leichliter, 2013).

Scholarship on student leadership in honors contexts has established the diversity of leadership opportunities that can be provided to students. However, a clear indication of the unique outcomes attendant on these various models is still missing. Student leaders have an indelible impact on their honors communities, but questions remain about the impact their experience has on them. No assessment yet exists on whether student leaders themselves come to feel a greater sense of connection with their honors institutions and the values that inform their missions. Similarly, assessment of leadership learning outcomes needs elaboration; only Bedetti (2017) provides a formal assessment of learning outcomes that peer leaders gained from their experience.

The current study provides an overview of the honors mentor program in the Purdue University Honors College: a uniquely constructed leadership development program in which peer mentors provide guidance to multidisciplinary teams of students in our first-year, project-based curriculum. The present study looks beyond the underlying curricular structure and focuses on the culture of servant leadership and community that has been instilled in the program. My goal is to consider how these dual elements of our leadership culture have promoted student leaders’ identification as members of the honors community as well as enhanced their leadership learning outcomes.

OVERVIEW OF THE HONORS MENTOR PROGRAM

The honors mentor program offers a a dynamic blend of academic leadership education, curricular leadership experience, and extracurricular opportunities. Each year, the program involves about a hundred peer mentors, each of whom guides a multidisciplinary team of seven or eight first-year honors students within our project-based learning curriculum. The first-year curriculum involves a single-credit, eight-week course in the first half of the fall and spring semesters. These courses meet twice a week, with the first class serving as a lecture and the second as project-oriented recitation led by the peer mentors. The mentors guide their respective teams in the completion of

interdisciplinary projects, help catalyze group development, and coach the first-year students on effective collaboration and leadership strategies. While their role is predominantly academic, mentors also help first-year students transition to college life and find a sense of community and belonging within the honors college. Mentors are only in play during the fall semester, and their goal is to cultivate the skills that first-year students will need in the spring semester when they will no longer have peer mentors to guide them.

Concurrent to the fall semester course for first-year students, mentors participate in an honors seminar that covers fundamental concepts on leadership and group development that are applicable to the mentors' responsibilities. This instruction is delivered in concert with individual reflections and group discussion among mentors, allowing them to integrate their leadership learning with the current conditions and needs of their teams. This curricular model aligns with scholarship on the value of combining leadership experience with guided reflection (Guthrie & Jones, 2012; Haber, 2011; Priest & Clegorne, 2015; Shook & Keup, 2012). Program participants have found this approach efficacious in cultivating core leadership outcomes. Based on a 2017 post-assessment survey ($n = 70$), 84% of respondents somewhat agreed or strongly agreed that they were better able to improve the teamwork and leadership skills of others based on their experience in the program that year. Additionally, 87% of respondents agreed that they were better able to communicate goals and objectives to others, 90% agreed that they were better able to promote a strong team culture, and 93% agreed that they were better able to lead a team toward shared goals. Based on data from focus groups that were also conducted as part of the assessment, mentors found the unique structure of the program conducive to their leadership learning, with many highlighting the opportunity to lead project teams over an eight-week period as well as the weekly cycle of instruction, experience, reflection, and feedback. This structure resulted in a kind of leadership laboratory where students could test out different strategies and develop a leadership style that worked for them (Watkins, forthcoming).

ESTABLISHING A LEADERSHIP CULTURE

While the underlying structure of the program has been significant in promoting key outcomes of leadership learning, the establishment of a leadership culture has been equally important. At its heart, our leadership culture consists of a dual focus on servant leadership oriented toward the growth of others and on the promotion of an inclusive community of learners. This

culture aligns closely with core values of the Relational Leadership Model, which takes a process-oriented approach to group endeavors and emphasizes the inclusion and empowerment of all group members (Haber, 2011). These elements are in some ways inherent in the peer mentors' role, which is to promote the skills of first-year students and to cultivate a sense of belonging within their class groups and the college at large. Several efforts have enhanced this culture and communicated its values.

First, a vision statement was developed in 2017 with help from top mentors, which outlined the leadership culture I hoped to entrench throughout the program:

The Honors Mentor Program follows a service orientation towards leadership, with emphasis on empowerment, ownership, and inclusion. At all levels of the program, each person's primary goal is to facilitate the growth of others. Each interaction is regarded as an opportunity for promoting teamwork and leadership skills in all involved, such that everyone is empowered in the process. Careful attention is paid to the processes behind individual learning, teamwork, and community development, so as to help students more fully grasp these processes, to take ownership of them, and to pass on their learning to others. Whether within the Honors community at large, the mentor community, or individual project teams, the importance of inclusion is held paramount, with a recognition that inclusion requires both an open mind toward all people and a willingness to act on behalf of others. (Watkins, *Honors Mentor Program*)

This vision statement provides a cultural touchstone for the peer leaders in the program, helping them to define the nature of their roles and their significance to the honors college at large.

Second, a deliberate effort was made to promote the leadership culture articulated in the vision statement through the annual orientation, training event, and extracurricular programming. At the orientation, I highlight three ideas for mentors to adopt into their leadership mentality. First, I affirm for mentors that their authority as student leaders is not rooted in their capacity to make others follow them but in the extent to which they take responsibility for the needs and growth of the first-year students they serve. While mentors have at least a year of experience in the honors college, this fact is not what truly distinguishes them from the first-year students; rather, it is the fact that only they go into the relationship with the explicit purpose of supporting

and empowering others. With this in mind, all mentors are asked to establish their role with their first-year students on day one by expressing in their own words that they are servant leaders dedicated to the growth of the students they serve. Second, I frame for mentors the tenets of a leadership philosophy based on the empowerment of others by explaining that their goal is not simply to help teams of first-year students collaborate effectively and complete projects; rather, the goal is for peer mentors to make themselves obsolete. In other words, they must provide first-year students the coaching and encouragement that will enable them to take ownership of their teams as well as their own growth as collaborators and leaders. Finally, I encourage mentors to reflect on the impact they will have as a cohort on the 700+ first-year students with whom they will work and thus their impact on the honors college community at large. Mentors are thus encouraged to see the role they play in shaping honors students' first impression of our college and in cultivating the next cohort of leaders.

In addition to the orientation, mentors participate in an annual training that focuses on diversity, inclusion, and allyship. A key point of emphasis in the training is that mentors are ethically responsible for all the students they serve, affirming the culture of an inclusive community. Mentors are then trained on how to create equitable group dynamics and how to provide all students with a sense of belonging. Thus, mentors are not simply told the value of creating an inclusive community of learners but are trained to make such communities a reality in their role as servant leaders.

Finally, since 2015 an extracurricular element has been coupled with the curricular aspects of the program in order to foster a sense of community among peer mentors and to further promote our leadership culture. The extracurricular programming has provided a valuable opportunity for an internal leadership structure within the program, referred to as the Mentor Council. Over the last three years, the council has made significant strides in taking ownership of the leadership culture and inviting others into the process. They have done so by developing extracurricular programming where mentors can help build an inclusive community, communicate the values of our leadership culture with each other, and have meaningful occasions for enacting those values.

In 2018, the program saw a marked improvement in peer mentors' engagement with the extracurricular programming implemented by the council. Across the spring and fall semesters of 2018, this involvement totaled approximately 815 hours. In 2019, the council coordinated and motivated 1,022 hours of extracurricular engagement, 641 of which were dedicated

to community-building events that spanned both semesters. Many of these events were casual, such as coffee hours and game nights, and others were more structured, like our annual Legacy Event and the concluding Mentor Celebration and Awards Ceremony. These events allowed mentors to create meaningful connections and develop a community bond, which in turn catalyzed peer-to-peer support within the program. They also provided council members an opportunity to communicate in their own words the core values outlined in the vision statement, which encouraged other mentors to further discuss and internalize those values.

In addition to the 600+ hours of community building in 2019, 275 hours were dedicated to fostering a sense of inclusion and belonging for first-year students during the fall semester. For instance, mentors met with first-year students for casual gatherings outside of class that led to at least 50 contact hours. In week three of the fall semester, the Mentor Council organized an initiative where mentors handed out cookies to first-year students and over 100 buttons that they had made, which came with notes of encouragement and statements about mentors' own challenges with transitioning to college. In these ways, the council created meaningful opportunities for mentors to take their servant leader role beyond their required duties in the classroom and to take ownership of building an inclusive community within the college.

The annual orientation, training, and extracurricular programming have enhanced the leadership culture within the mentor program. The growing number of engagement and contact hours suggests that such a culture has taken root and begun to thrive. The questions that must now be pursued are whether this leadership culture has influenced our peer mentors' sense of connection with the honors college and its values as well as what impact, if any, it has had on their leadership learning.

ASSESSMENT METHODOLOGY

In 2018 and 2019, annual post-assessments were implemented that involved a survey and focus groups. A total of 162 of 199 possible mentors participated in the post-assessment surveys over these two years although four did not do so to completion. Participants were assured that I, as the director of the program and PI of the study, would not be able to correlate their identities with their answers and that their answers would thus have no bearing on their continued participation in the program. An assistant with CITI certification scrubbed the survey data of identifying information before providing me with the results for analysis.

Beginning in 2018, the post-assessment consisted of a first set of questions that addressed the following:

- Participants' overall satisfaction with their experience in the program.
- The degree to which participants agreed that they felt a sense of community among the other mentors in the program.
- The degree to which participants agreed that their experience in the program that year helped them better understand the values of the honors college.
- The degree to which participants agreed that their experience in the program that year increased their identification as a member of the honors college community.

Participants responded to the first question based on a five-point Likert scale of satisfaction (very satisfied, somewhat satisfied, neutral, somewhat dissatisfied, and very dissatisfied). For the next three questions, participants responded based on a five-point Likert scale of agreement (Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree).

The next two sets of questions focused on leadership learning outcomes. The first asked students to report whether they agreed that they were better able to perform five key leadership behaviors that were central to their role as mentors. These behaviors align strongly with core leadership practices highlighted by prominent models for leadership development, including the Relational Leadership Model, the Social Change Model, and the Leadership Challenge Model (Haber, 2011; Rosch & Anthony, 2012). They consist of the following:

- Ability to promote group development by fostering a strong team culture.
- Ability to communicate goals and objectives to others.
- Ability to lead a team toward shared goals.
- Ability to cultivate the teamwork and leadership skills of others.
- Ability to understand and cultivate one's own leadership.

While the first four questions were consistent with the 2017 post-assessment, the fifth question was added in 2018. Participants were asked whether they

agreed, based on a five-point Likert scale, that their experience in the program that year made them better able to perform these leadership behaviors. A third set of questions also invited participants to report their gains across sixteen leadership competencies, based on those developed by Corey Seemiller (2016). For the sake of brevity, participants' responses to this third set of questions are not included in this analysis.

Indirect self-evaluation measures are common in studies on leadership development and have been documented as a reasonably effective method for assessing student leadership learning and competency development, but they do have their limitations (Goertzen, 2009; Roberts & Bailey, 2016; Seemiller, 2016). Given these limitations, focus groups were also conducted in order to corroborate and gain a more nuanced perspective on satisfaction levels, leadership learning outcomes, and sense of connection with the honors college community and values. All mentors in the program were invited to participate in these focus groups. In 2018, a CITI certified student who was also a participant in the program conducted three focus groups with a total of 19 participants. In 2019, a CITI certified staff member, who provides administrative assistance to the program, conducted one focus group with a total of seven participants. To ensure candor, participants were assured that their responses would remain anonymous. Recordings of these sessions were transcribed, and the transcriptions were scrubbed of identifying information before analysis.

LEADERSHIP CULTURE AND IDENTIFYING WITH HONORS

Data from the first set of questions in the 2018 and 2019 post-assessment surveys ($n = 158$) reveal the role that leadership culture played in promoting peer mentors' identification as members of the honors college community and their understanding of its values (see Table 1). Across the two years, about two thirds of the participants were "very satisfied" with their experience in the program, and about two thirds "strongly agreed" that they had a better understanding of the value of the college and that they identified as a member of the honors college to a greater extent. Respondents' sense of community within the program was also encouraging, particularly given the lack of community in previous years.

In the surveys, respondents also indicated their level of involvement with the extracurricular elements of the program. Table 2 shows how students responded to the four initial questions in relation to their level of involvement. Not surprisingly, the scores for sense of community tended to increase

for students with greater levels of involvement. Furthermore, their satisfaction with the program, their understanding of the value of the honors college, and their identification as a member of the honors college also increased with greater involvement. As Stanlick (2006) argues, membership in a community is about more than acceptance; it is about performing actions and enacting

TABLE 1. DATA FROM THE FIRST SET OF QUESTIONS IN THE 2018 AND 2019 POST-ASSESSMENT SURVEYS

Questionnaire Item	Average Score	Very Satisfied	Somewhat Satisfied	Total Satisfied
Overall, how satisfied were you with your experience in the 2018/2019 Mentor Program?	4.56	63%	32%	95%
Questionnaire Item	Average Score	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Total Agree
I felt a sense of community amongst the mentors.	4.19	39%	46%	85%
My experience in the Mentor Program this year helped me to better understand the value of the Honors College.	4.59	66%	28%	94%
My experience in the Mentor Program this year increased the degree to which I identify as an Honors College student.	4.52	65%	26%	91%

TABLE 2. RESPONDENT LEVELS OF INVOLVEMENT WITH THE EXTRACURRICULAR ELEMENTS OF THE PROGRAM

Questionnaire Item	Not Particularly Involved (n = 36)	Somewhat Involved (n = 90)	Very Involved (n = 32)
Overall, how satisfied were you with your experience in the 2018/2019 Mentor Program?	4.25	4.59	4.81
I felt a sense of community amongst the mentors.	3.83	4.16	4.72
My experience in the Mentor Program this year helped me to better understand the value of the Honors College.	4.19	4.66	4.88
My experience in the Mentor Program this year increased the degree to which I identify as an Honors College student.	4.08	4.57	4.84

values consistent with the culture of the community. The more peer mentors performed such actions through extracurricular programming, the greater sense of connection they felt with the honors college community and the more they understood its value.

The qualitative data from the 2018 and 2019 focus groups provide greater insight into how the leadership culture of the program led to a greater sense of connection with the honors college and its values. In the focus groups, mentors were asked, “What impact, if any, has your experience in the mentor program had on how you identify with the Honors College or how you understand its values?” Of the 26 mentors who took part in these focus groups, 22 provided answers to this question, which revealed four key themes: servant leadership that focused on the growth of others; community engagement; the value of the honors college experience; and connection with faculty. The two most salient themes were servant leadership and community, which were often discussed in tandem as in the following statements:

[W]hen I was a freshman, I felt like the Honors College was able to provide that sense of community being in this big, big school, and through the Mentor Program, I feel like it’s my way of giving back. . . . I feel like now that I’m in a position to kind of do that, I pay it forward. That’s also kind of like one of my drives and this is one reason I love being a mentor so much. (Participant 4, 2019)

[B]eing able to see what a community in the Honors College can look like and how amazing that can be really drove home the whole point of the Honors College and like the devotion to improving the climate at Purdue University and making the first-year students like their experience better. And so I think after this year I definitely identify a lot with the Honors College, where, like, I can see the good that’s being done. (Participant 6, 2018c)

For six respondents, including the two listed above, the sense of community within the honors college was connected to their role as servant leaders, which allowed them to perform their membership in the college in a meaningful way. Overall, 8 of the 22 mentors who responded to this question referenced in some way a servant leadership oriented toward the growth of others while 11 stressed a sense of connection with the honors community that the program facilitated.

An important thread within the theme of community was a shared concern about losing their connection with the honors college community after

their first year. Participating in the mentor program provided “a way for me to maintain that community,” said one student (Participant 2, 2018a). A second student echoed this point: “The sense of community is this great thing. It’s kind of grown a lot since my last year in this program. Kind of having a network of a lot of other honors students, and you’re facilitating interaction, not just saying hi with people” (Participant 8, 2018a). This thread reappeared strongly in the 2019 focus group as five of the seven participants shared the sentiment that, after their first year, “staying a part of the Honors College is pretty difficult because you’re not living there anymore” and that the mentor program provided them an essential link (Participant 7, 2019). One participant explained, “it’s my only tie and this basically is the only reason I come to the building. And the building, I think, is what help keeps me grounded in the Honors College” (Participant 2, 2019). As noted by several focus group participants, being in the building made it easier for them to stay in touch with the first-year students they served, to engage with other mentors, and/or to build stronger relationships with faculty.

The third theme is an extension of the discussion above: while mentors are developing networks with other honors students, they are also making stronger connections with the faculty. Six of the 22 respondents referred to their work with faculty through the program as an integral part of their enhanced sense of connection with the college. As one student noted, “And so the mentor program was kind of my link to the Honors College. I think one of the most important connections that I’ve made is like with the different professors and things like that. Cause I think it really gives you a chance to connect with them more as well” (Participant 7, 2019). For some respondents, the meetings with faculty—some of which occurred outside of class—were a key part of “building the community,” helping them further “evaluate what the Honors College stood for” (Participant 2, 2018c).

The fourth key theme, noted by seven of the 22 respondents, was a greater understanding of the value the honors college provided to students and the correlated values that inform its mission. In two cases, students highlighted leadership as one of the four pillars of the college, i.e., as a core element of its mission. One made a particularly apt point about how the program affirms this pillar at multiple levels:

I would say especially with this program maybe more than others, like, the pillar of leadership has really been kind of brought to life and you really see what that means to be a leader. Because, like, as a leader of the group you’re in that role directly, but you’re also trying to build

up new leaders and have them take responsibility. So you really get to see a lot of that pillar of the college at work. (Participant 3, 2018b)

Here, a core value of the college is aligned explicitly with the servant leadership approach that is central to the culture of the program. Another respondent explained that being in the program helped them “remember all of the benefits and the values that I have learned from being in the Honors College,” which included “interdisciplinary work and collaboration” (Participant 2, 2018a). Interdisciplinary academics is another core value of the college—one of the other four pillars—and was stressed by two other respondents. One explained: “It was definitely really neat to be a part of a group that is so interdisciplinary and really gave me an appreciation for how the Honors College can integrate people with different majors and backgrounds” (Participant 2, 2018b). The second said in response:

In the group, it was interesting to see how eight students with totally different backgrounds and totally different majors are working together towards one common purpose. And so I really appreciated how that kind of showed me what each person can bring to the table that’s different. . . . So I think that idea of diversity is really apparent to me as a mentor this year. I appreciated that more. (Participant 3, 2018b)

Here, the respondent’s initial focus on interdisciplinarity expands to a more general value that runs across the mentor program and the honors college: a respect for diversity and a dedication to fostering an inclusive community of learners.

LEADERSHIP CULTURE AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

In addition to exploring the impact that a leadership culture can have on how student leaders understand their sense of connection within an honors institution, it is also worth considering whether the promotion of a strong leadership culture has any influence on leadership learning. To provide a baseline for this discussion, I will first outline how participants responded to the post-assessment survey questions about the five leadership practices that define the core learning outcomes of the program (see Table 3). The 2018 mean scores were all higher than they had been in 2017, though marginally so. The largest increase came in improving the teamwork and leadership skills of others. In 2017, participants reported a mean score of 4.26, with 36% of respondents strongly agreeing that they were better able to improve

these skills in other students. In 2018, the mean increased to 4.40, with 46% of participants strongly agreeing. In 2019, all mean scores increased except for improving teamwork and leadership skills of others, which fell between the 2017 and 2018 means but still saw a slight increase in the percentage of respondents who strongly agreed. Given that these leadership practices are consistent with a servant leader approach within a team-based context, it is encouraging to see that respondents have increasingly agreed over the last three years that they are better able to perform these practices.

As with the previous set of data regarding satisfaction, community, value, and identification, respondents' scores for improvement in core leadership practices were also strongly correlated with their level of engagement with extracurricular programming (see Table 4). Given that the core function of the extracurricular programming is to foster the program's leadership culture by affirming and amplifying the peer mentors' role as servant leaders and establishing an inclusive community, it is tempting to see these scores as indicating a connection between the leadership culture and leadership learning outcomes, but making such definitive claims is difficult. For instance, peer mentors' involvement in the extracurricular programming may simply reflect their dedication to their roles and this dedication led to their perception of increased improvement in leadership practices.

The focus group data from 2018 and 2019 give a clearer picture of the impact the leadership culture has had on peer mentors' leadership learning. One of the more salient themes from the focus group responses was that mentors saw the servant leadership orientation toward the growth of others as a defining and distinguishing feature of the program.

When asked to describe how their experience in the program had been different from other leadership roles, 16 of the 25 respondents referred in some way to their servant leadership. Two emphasized that in comparison to other peer teaching roles they had held, their role as a mentor was more focused on creating healthy bonds with the students they served (Participant 7, 2018a; Participant 6, 2018a). Most indicated that this role was unique in that their previous leadership roles had required that they take control of the team or project, but their goal as an honors mentor was to be "a support system for other students and trying to bring a group of people together" (Participant 1, 2019). Mentoring in this program was unique because "it has a specific focus on empowerment. . . . [I]t's more so setting them up to succeed because for mentoring the goal is for them to be autonomous" (Participant 4, 2019). Along similar lines, a third mentor claimed that "more than any other leadership role you are responsible for making sure that they own the group

... you're really encouraging them to all be their own leaders and take control of the group" (Participant 3, 2018b). Focus group participants repeatedly emphasized that this orientation to leadership was much different from what they had experienced before, leading them to see leadership in more nuanced

TABLE 3. RESPONSES ABOUT THE FIVE LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT DEFINE THE CORE LEARNING OUTCOMES

Questionnaire Item	2018 (n = 82)			2019 (n = 80)		
	Mean Score	% Strongly Agree	% Strongly Agree or Agree	Mean Score	% Strongly Agree	% Strongly Agree or Agree
I am now better able to understand and develop my own leadership skills.	4.44	51.9%	92.6%	4.53	61.3%	96.3%
I am now better able to improve the teamwork and leadership skills of others.	4.40	45.7%	92.6%	4.34	46.3%	90.0%
I am now better able to articulate goals and objectives to others.	4.31	37.0%	95.1%	4.53	56.3%	93.8%
I am now better able to lead a team toward shared goals.	4.30	37.0%	93.8%	4.45	51.1%	95.0%
I am now better able to promote a strong team culture.	4.30	37.0%	93.8%	4.40	46.3%	90.0%

TABLE 4. RESPONSES REGARDING THE LEVEL OF ENGAGEMENT WITH EXTRACURRICULAR PROGRAMMING

Level of Involvement in Extra-Curricular Programming	I am now better able to promote a strong team culture.	I am now better able to lead a team toward shared goals.	I am now better able to improve the teamwork and leadership skills of others.	I am now better able to articulate goals and objectives to others.	I am now better able to understand and develop my own leadership skills.
Not particularly	4.33	4.13	3.73	4.13	4.07
Somewhat	4.31	4.42	4.44	4.49	4.56
Very involved	4.65	4.75	4.55	4.90	4.80

and complex terms than they had previously. For many, their experience redefined what good leadership looks like and what kinds of leaders they wanted to become. As one participant described:

I think I've learned a lot about how, just like the different definitions of a leader and the different functions that a leader has. Because previously I always kind of considered a leader to be someone who does everything and who kind of oversees everything. But through this course I've learned that sometimes the leader is not the person who is at the forefront of everything and directing everything, but sometimes the leader is actually the person that steps back and kind of facilitates from the outside and lets other people grow and just try to support them and help them grow in whatever way possible. So I think it's definitely reshaped how I think of a leader and how I want to be a leader moving forward. (Participant 1, 2019)

Overall, 22 of the 26 focus group participants discussed ways that the servant approach to leadership supported learning outcomes related to group development, leading others to shared goals, promoting the collaboration skills of others, and developing their own understanding of leadership. Of the 22 focus group participants to stress servant leadership, nine described meaningful learning about the level of investment or care that is required to be a good leader. Responding to a question about their biggest takeaways from the program that year, one student said, "learning the importance of caring . . . showing your investment that we care about them as individuals more than just the class made such a difference in their performance" (Participant 8, 2018a).

A common theme in these responses was that investment in the growth of others led to greater critical thinking about individual needs and group development. One student noted that as simply a member of a team, it is difficult to "really see the deeper meaning" in the group dynamic, but as a mentor, "that's my goal, to kind of see each person in that team and kind of care more about them and their role" (Participant 2, 2018a). This investment in the needs of other students also led to the development of important interpersonal skills, as described by several mentors. One student noted that they "definitely learned to be more empathetic" in an effort to "try to understand their perspective so that I can work better with them" (Participant 1, 2018b). Five others placed a strong emphasis on developing listening and observing skills in order to learn more about the individuals in their groups. The increased knowledge of individuals put mentors in a better position to suggest

ways of using strengths to create more effective collaboration (Participant 2, 2019), to establish healthier group norms in promoting group development (Participant 6, 2018c), or to “foster a more inclusive environment” and thus “make the team better” (Participant 2, 2019).

Mentors also noted that focusing on the growth of the students they served encouraged a process-oriented view of collaboration and working toward shared goals. One mentor noted that “rather than helping them with the physical projects they were working on,” he or she was able to focus more on “empowerment and promoting ally-ship within themselves so that they could do the work to lead themselves towards completion” (Participant 7, 2019). As another mentor put it, “You try to foster them, direct them in the path the project is supposed to go and you’re not actively doing it. . . . So I think going to this program taught me a lot more about the process to get the result” (Participant 3, 2018b). Other mentors affirmed that as a servant leader geared toward the growth of others, they found themselves focusing on the processes behind “building the skills they need” and “promot[ing] success in a group” (Participant 3, 2018a; Participant 2, 2018b). Based on these responses, it seems clear that mentors came to understand that leading teams to shared goals means focusing less on the product and more on personal growth and ownership. A focus on the processes behind group development and individual growth gives mentors a unique perspective on “what exactly makes a successful team,” as one mentor learned (Participant 4, 2018a).

As the servant leader approach led to more critical thinking about team needs and processes, it also led to robust learning about situational leadership. In a situational approach, leaders recognize that “different situations call for different styles, and therefore maintain flexibility in displaying concern for tasks and people, choosing their style depending on the skill and comfort level of team members” (Rosch & Anthony, 2012, p. 41). Prioritizing the growth of their groups rather than their own assumptions about leadership or teamwork, mentors found that they frequently had to adapt their leadership strategies in order to meet evolving needs. While challenging, this effort to adapt allowed mentors to think about both leadership and group development in highly complex ways. As one student stated:

I feel like too often when people talk about group development it’s just sort of done in an idealized way. And it’s, like, not useful. And I think that the Honors Mentor Program is really unique in that not only is there this language and environment to actually be talking about how to improve as a leader and how to influence group

development, different strategies you can do . . . and how you need to adapt in response to both your own abilities and the particular needs of your group and how those may change throughout the semester. And just like having that opportunity to actually think critically about that. (Participant 5, 2018c)

Throughout the focus groups, participants placed a common emphasis on the challenges that come with adapting to students' evolving needs and how such challenges promote critical thinking and leadership learning. One student described coming into the program knowing "one way that I had led and had been relatively successful before" but then realizing:

in the role that you serve that may not necessarily be the best thing for different people or even different groups of people. There's several different strategies that you have to find. So I'd say before coming in I kind of had one way of going about being a leader. Then as the weeks went on, I found different ways to be a leader and to talk to people. (Participant 3, 2018b)

In total, twelve participants described a similar realization about needing to learn different leadership approaches to accommodate the unique dynamics of their groups or to respond appropriately to the group's evolving needs "as the projects changed and as people grew" (Participant 1, 2019). This realization led all the students to an increased understanding of "how to adapt . . . to different challenges" (Participant 4, 2018b), to an expanded sense of "all the ways that you could possibly be a leader" (Participant 3, 2019), or to more critical thinking about "what they needed from me and how I could fulfill that" (Participant 2, 2018a).

While mentors are dedicated to building an inclusive team environment that supports growth in all its members, they are also actively involved in creating a larger community of learners. While less strongly emphasized than their experience with servant leadership, mentors who participated in the focus groups also reflected on "the experience of building a community" (Participant 5, 2018a). Five of the focus group participants stressed that community building through extracurricular initiatives either encouraged them to further engage with first-year students outside of class or affirmed their sense of commitment to servant leadership within the program. As one mentor noted, "It's kind of awesome that there's this community of people who are all very dedicated to helping first-year students and like growing as people. And like, that's just, it's awesome" (Participant 6, 2018c).

Another sixteen of the focus group participants highlighted how the cultivation of the mentor community through extracurricular events enhanced their experience, with twelve of them stressing that the community aspect improved their leadership learning. In four instances, respondents observed that the extracurricular programming strengthened the bonds between mentors within the same course, allowing them to be “so much more comfortable with them and able to open up and be honest” (Participant 2, 2018a). As the student suggests, greater comfort between mentors in the same class has led to better communication, more honest discussions, and greater learning. (Several faculty members have also noted the increased sense of comradery in their mentor classes and the positive benefits they have seen in how mentors are supporting each other’s growth). For eight other focus group participants, the casual community events put on by the mentor council allowed them to meet mentors outside of their course and access a wider variety of perspectives on leadership. One student described “getting so much out of it and having such good conversations,” which ultimately “helped me develop and really also influenced my view of leadership, too” (Participant 2, 2018a). A participant from another focus group stressed that these casual events allowed the mentors to interact with “all these diverse people” and allowed them to see the diverse ways that students “went about being a mentor” (Participant 6, 2018c).

By embracing a leadership culture based on service to individual growth and community inclusion, peer mentors are motivated to excel as leaders. They are challenged to provide leadership that meets the evolving needs of the students they serve, empowering them to become the owners of their own growth and learning. Such challenges are not only worthy of peer leaders, but they also enhance their leadership learning. The results are peer mentors who have rethought their views on leadership, who have put extra care and thought into those they serve, and who have gained a more complex understanding of the processes behind group development and cultivation of a successful team.

CONCLUSION

The participants’ responses in the focus groups showed that our student leaders have internalized the leadership culture that has been established in the honors mentor program. Their definitions of and approaches to their leadership role are based firmly in the notions of servant leadership and in their dedication to the empowerment of the students they serve. So, too, have they embraced the value of an inclusive community of learners; they not only see the important role they play in establishing inclusive communities within

their groups of first-year students but also the role they play in fostering community connections within the honors college at large. These values have shaped their understanding of leadership and their learning outcomes, but they have also been integral in promoting peer mentors' sense of connection with the honors college and its values. By internalizing the leadership culture at stake in the program, peer mentors have a clearer vision of why their actions matter to the community they serve and in turn have a greater sense of identification with that community. In short, our peer mentors have not only gained entrance to an honors community of learners, but they have—in a meaningful and self-aware way—taken ownership of it.

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