

# **EXPLORING UNDERGRADUATE LEADERSHIP PROGRAM ATTRIBUTES FROM THE ALUMNI LENS**

**John D. Egan**

Georgia Southern University

**Juliann Sergi McBrayer**

Georgia Southern University

**Pamela Wells**

Georgia Southern University

**Steven Tolman**

Georgia Southern University

Institutions of higher education espouse the importance of developing future leaders, although limited research assesses undergraduate leadership programs from the alumni lens. Interviews with alumni from a student affairs leadership program revealed the importance of incorporating leadership experiences, learning community, formal learning, peer coaching, and reflection in leadership programming. Alumni valued the program due to skills learned and experiential capital gained. This study provides practitioners with evidence-based practices for leadership program development and highlights the importance of the alumni perspective.

Please direct inquires about this manuscript to: John D. Egan, [jegan@georgiasouthern.edu](mailto:jegan@georgiasouthern.edu)

Leadership development continues to be a valued outcome for institutions of higher education as “many college mission statements contain commitments to develop citizen leaders or prepare students for professional and community responsibilities...” (Council for the Advancement of Standards [CAS] in Higher Education, 2012, p. 447). Since the 1980s, this value has been displayed through the proliferation of leadership programs on college campuses that are both curricular and co-curricular (CAS, 2012). Undergraduates are increasingly engaging in co-curricular leadership programming, and the majority of these programs are situated within student affairs (Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018). During this growth in leadership programming, an effort has been made by researchers to explore leadership pedagogy, and have found that experiential learning, reflection, classroom dynamics, and other attributes associated with quality leadership programs are important for leadership learning (Boettcher & Gansemar-Topf, 2015; Buschlen & Warner, 2014; Eich, 2008; Fritz & Guthrie, 2017; Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2013; Odom, 2015; White & Guthrie, 2016). However, limited research exists that assesses undergraduate leadership program attributes from the perspective of alumni.

We sought to fill this gap, as the alumni lens surrounding program attributes may help student affairs practitioners develop high-quality leadership programs and as a result make good on institutions’ purported value of developing future leaders. Our study assessed the value college graduates placed on their previous participation in an undergraduate leadership program and explored the alumni perception of programmatic attributes. To this end, the following research questions were addressed: 1) What attributes of the undergraduate leadership program have the most perceived value for program alumni? 2) What leadership learning would have been beneficial that was not included in the leadership program? 3) What was the perceived value of the leader-

ship program for alumni in their professional career?

### Review of the Literature

The literature review will begin with introducing Eich’s (2008) theory of high-quality leadership programs as the conceptual framework and will transition to an examination of pedagogical elements important for leadership learning. The review will conclude with the limited literature that exists surrounding leadership program assessments in higher education that involve the alumni perspective.

### Conceptual Framework

Eich (2008) developed a grounded theory of high-quality leadership programs through interviews with 62 stakeholders from four different undergraduate leadership programs that met specific criteria designating them as high-quality. Eich’s (2008) work is one of the more robust studies on co-curricular leadership programs and is referenced frequently in leadership education literature (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2013; Guthrie & Jenkins, 2018; Jenkins, 2013; Lunsford & Brown, 2017; Rosch & Caza, 2012). Although it is not typically used as a framework, we chose it due to its narrow focus on attributes of leadership programs, and the empirical work supporting the theory is founded upon an exploration of co-curricular undergraduate programs. It therefore aligned well with our purposes of exploring the alumni perspective on the attributes and value of an undergraduate leadership program. Finally, though not the primary purpose of our work, the present study may serve to reaffirm or encourage future use of Eich’s (2008) theory of high-quality leadership programs.

The grounded theory included 16 program attributes which contributed to student learning and leadership development (Eich, 2008). The attributes were organized into three clusters which included: building and sustaining learning community, experiential learning focused on students, and the

program continues to develop and is rooted in research. The first cluster, pertaining to the learning community, revealed that students help each other develop as leaders. High-quality programs included engaged students from diverse backgrounds that both challenge and support each other. The programs included experienced, student-centered educators that practice leadership in front of students. There were structures that facilitated one-on-one conversations and made educators accessible. Finally, smaller groups within programs were formed for learning and community building purposes.

The second cluster tied to high-quality leadership programs focused on experiential learning (Eich, 2008). Students were afforded the opportunity to practice leadership through group work on class projects, community service, and leadership retreat experiences. Students were permitted to reflect on learning and make connections to their

experiences. Reflection activities included journals, quiet pondering of questions, and reflective dialogue. Additional reflection occurred in the form of individually developed leadership plans, and self-assessment tools for personality, strengths, and values were examined. Finally, students faced challenging moments and were exposed to people that were different from themselves.

The final cluster showed that high-quality programs were rooted in research, and the programs continued to develop (Eich, 2008). Programmatic values were incorporated that focused on the socially just purpose of leadership or using leadership for positive gains. Furthermore, the mission and values were displayed in the actions of the programs' participants. High-quality programs also had some flexibility that allowed students to choose areas of interest. Finally, the programs sought to continually improve through feedback assessments and the application of research. The model of

### Figure 1

*Model of High-Quality Leadership Programs Adapted from Eich (2008)*

#### **Cluster 1: Participants engaged in building and sustaining a learning community**

1. Diverse students
2. Experienced practitioners
3. Modeling educators
4. Small groups
5. Supportive culture
6. One-on-one relationships

#### **Cluster 2: Student-centered experiential learning experiences**

7. Leadership practice
8. Reflection activities
9. Application in meetings
10. Meaningful discussions
11. Episodes of difference
12. Civic service
13. Discovery retreats

#### **Cluster 3: Research-grounded continuous program development**

14. Flexible design
15. Values content
16. Systems thinking

high-quality leadership programs, found in Figure 1, displays all 16 program attributes associated with high-quality leadership programs and their corresponding clusters.

### **Pedagogical Elements in Leadership Learning**

In this section of the literature review we examine different pedagogical elements associated with positive leadership learning outcomes with undergraduates and further connect these with Eich's (2008) theory. Reflection in groups through discussion and individual reflection is an important pedagogical practice that can enhance the leadership learning of undergraduates (Eich, 2008; Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2013; Odom, 2015; White & Guthrie, 2016). Leadership learning was enhanced through reflective instructors, a reflective culture, and discussion-based courses (White & Guthrie, 2016). Another study noted group discussion as being effective for leadership learning because discussions led to open-mindedness on different perspectives, and students stated that the practice challenged their own thinking (Odom, 2015). The value of individual reflection and collective reflection through discussion was also highlighted through a unique leadership course that invited students to develop many of the learning activities and assessments (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2013). Students perceived three experiences as important to their learning process including reflection, engaging in the group process, and feedback. Reflection included an intrapersonal component of self-reflection and an interpersonal component of collective activity involving discussion. Reflection allowed students to make sense of their learning and to understand themselves in the context of their course experience. This supports Eich's (2008) conclusion that reflection activities were an attribute found in a high-quality leadership programs and may explain why Jenkins (2013) found that discussions and reflective journals were among the top 10 instructional practices of leadership educators.

Studies have shown the importance of including experiential attributes in leadership education (Buschlen & Warner, 2014; Boettcher & Gansemar-Topf, 2015). For instance, a kayaking training trip for student employees of a recreation department, led to participants being able to articulate learned leadership and having a better understanding of their leadership identity (Boettcher & Gansemar-Topf, 2015). Participants engaged in rebuilding homes following a natural disaster, reflected on learning across the Social Change Model leadership value domains including individual, group, and community values (Buschlen & Warner, 2014). Eich's (2008) review of high-quality leadership programs devoted an entire cluster to experiential learning that included attributes of leadership practice, application in meetings, community service, and retreats.

However, experiential learning attributes do not always lead to the increased leadership capacity of students, and this is the case when the opportunity to practice leadership through experience is not coupled with purposeful leadership curriculum (Rosch, 2015). Similarly, students in another study did not experience gains on a leadership assessment after participating in an intensive service learning project, and the authors noted this may have been because the course did not include any discussions about leadership (Romsa et al., 2017). This provides additional evidence that experiential attributes should be designed alongside purposeful leadership curriculum.

Various learning environment dynamics also deserve exploration in leadership education pedagogy. Students who were in a leadership certificate program revealed the importance of quality faculty, diversity, small class size, one-on-one discussions, and the enrollment of students from multiple disciplines with diverse backgrounds in the process of values clarification (Fritz & Guthrie, 2017). The students also spoke to the importance of a supportive environment, in which differing values were respected. These studies findings were congruent with

four of Eich's (2008) attributes of high-quality leadership programs including: diverse students, supportive culture, small groups, and one-on-one relationships.

### **Alumni Leadership Assessments in Higher Education**

Alumni remain a mostly untapped population for exploring the effectiveness of leadership programming in higher education. One study that included alumni of a leadership program noted that experiential learning such as service-learning, service projects, and service trips led to significant leadership development (Soesbe, 2012). Participants frequently mentioned the importance of deep reflection in the program through activities including: reflection with peers, leadership journals, and written papers. The program was a valuable experience that impacts alumni today and made them more competitive when seeking employment. Furthermore, a study involving alumni indicated that their prior experience in a leadership minor made them more competitive in the job market (Mitchell & Daugherty, 2019). Having quality instructors and the required internship were the highest rated attributes of the program. Limited research explores the alumni perspective of undergraduate leadership programming, and this is especially true for co-curricular programming. More research utilizing the alumni lens is warranted due to this gap in the literature. Additionally, this population is uniquely positioned to explore if programming is appropriately preparing students as future leaders and to examine the efficacy of program attributes.

### **Methods**

The research was guided by a basic qualitative research approach, as this approach is concerned with how people understand their experiences and the meaning they apply to these experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The overall design for this study included a semi-structured interview with eight alumni of the Empower Leaders

program, and we found the data collected from these participants was sufficient to address the research questions. Additionally, these participants represent 14% of the entire population of 57 alumni who had completed all elements of the program at the time of this study.

### **Empower Leaders Program**

The Empower Leaders program, a pseudonym to protect participant confidentiality, was coordinated by a student affairs unit focused on service and leadership. This four-year, co-curricular program was situated at a large university in the southeastern United States and included learning objectives connected to the following four areas: self-leadership, collaboration, community and organizational leadership, and leadership legacy. Students completed either three or four non-credit leadership courses depending on when they joined the program, and the courses met once-per-week for one hour and fifteen minutes. Each of the courses included some exploration of the Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership along with other course content (Kouzes & Posner, 2014). The courses employed teaching strategies such as group discussions, written reflection assignments, case studies, serious games, problem-based learning, and other interactive elements with very limited lecture time.

Additional program requirements included attending workshops, participating in peer leadership coaching, attending a leadership conference, holding a student leadership position for at least two semesters, completing 125 service hours, participating in an alternative break trip, and completing a capstone leadership legacy project. Students created their own capstone project which were required to be feasible, have a meaningful impact on some community, and be sustainable beyond the student's direct involvement. Students were encouraged to form teams or partnerships to execute their projects. At the time this study was conducted, there were a total of 57 alumni who

graduated from the institution and completed all elements of the program.

### Research Design

We used purposeful sampling as the participants were selected due to their previous participation in the Empower Leaders program. We also employed criterion sampling to select participants that completed all elements of the Empower Leaders program, were employed at least part-time, and had the technological capability to engage in a web-based video interview. Additional criteria focused on diversity in graduation date, undergraduate major, gender, and race to attain diversification criteria needed in the exploration of the lived experiences of alumni from a leadership program (Soesbe, 2012). After identifying 17 eligible participants from an initial screening of the 57 total alumni who completed all elements of the program, eight participants were recruited into the study.

Prior to interviews, we sent participants a list of program requirements to serve as a reflection tool during the interview. One-hour, semi-structured interviews with each participant were guided by an interview protocol designed with consideration for the research questions, literature review, and conceptual framework. To bolster trustworthiness, we incorporated triangulation, reflexivity, and member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Triangulation occurred between individual interviews as well through corroboration with leadership program materials (program requirements, syllabi, learning objectives). Intentional reflexive journaling was conducted at the end of each interview, and member checks were completed by soliciting feedback from participants on themes developed from interviews.

Creswell and Poth's (2018) data analysis spiral operated as our principal guide for data analysis with the infusion of specific coding techniques. Interview recordings were transcribed and reviewed for accuracy. Our analysis initially began on physical copies of transcripts as notations of emerg-

ing concepts were made in the margins. We employed initial, structural, and evaluation coding during the first cycle of coding while memos were written in NVivo 10 to reflect on evolving codes. A master list of codes reflective of the data were organized into a codebook and index. Utilizing pattern coding, we organized these first cycle codes into meta-codes, which were used in the development of major theme descriptions (Saldaña, 2009).

### Participants

The participants included two male and six female recent alumni (graduated from institution within last four years) who completed all elements of the program. The age range was from 23-28 and participants provided the following self-descriptions regarding their race or ethnicity: Caucasian, Non-Hispanic, Caucasian and Asian, Caucasian, White, African American, Black, and African American. They graduated with a wide range of majors with none overlapping, and were currently employed in either a non-profit organization, a government agency, or worked in education. The participants each held from three to seven student leadership positions while in college and were involved in community service.

### Findings

The findings are structured around the three research questions and will consist of thematic findings supported by evidence found in the data.

#### **Research Question 1: What attributes of the program have the most perceived value for program alumni?**

Five primary themes were identified that alumni believed to be the most valuable attributes of the program including leadership experiences, learning community, formal learning, peer coaching, and intentional reflection. This section will conclude with a conceptual framework that explains how these program attribute themes fit together in practice.

### **Leadership Experiences**

Leadership experiences, specific activities, or action-oriented components of the program were perceived as being valuable to program alumni. This included experiential components such as the requirement to hold leadership positions on campus, service requirements, the requirement to attend alternative break trips, leadership retreats, and other action-oriented experiences tied to the program. Contributing to this theme, Sarah stated, "The service requirements because I mean that's what I've talked about the most I think was the AB trips, the [Summer Leadership and Service Program]." In this statement Sarah noticed that much of the interview to that point had focused on these experiential components. While discussing the most valuable attributes of the program, Britney echoed this theme saying, "I do think that the retreat that we went on was very helpful." Finally, Thomas fully captured the essence of these leadership experiences from the program when he said:

The experience, the requirement of when you do [the leadership course while] you're in a role, putting your leadership into practice. I think the classes were great, but you know every time you know talking through today, it's always about what I did. It was the [executive leadership position]... I think that is the most valuable thing is requiring experience, requiring those positions.

Thomas seems to rank the experiential components as having the highest value as compared to other portions of the program, and he also simultaneously expressed the opportunity afforded to put the course content into practice through these experiences.

### **Learning Community**

The learning community and the relationships formed in the program were perceived as valuable to program alumni. This included relationships with peers and mentor relationships with leadership educators

in the program. These relationships continue to have value for alumni after graduation, were leveraged for career advancement, and the community found in the program was connected to the leadership learning. Britney stated, "I think it's just relationships that I was able to build with the leaders as well as also other students." She continues to rely on these relationships by "being able to reach back to them and say, 'Hey, I have this going on. Can you guide me in the right direction?'" Reese connected the learning with the Empower Leaders community stating, "It's the students that I met that I learned alongside and now I'm sharing in their journeys." Alumni also spoke of the importance of their mentor relationships with program staff or faculty they became connected with due to the program.

Lola connected with a faculty member through her capstone legacy project, and later leveraged this relationship to advance her goals. She referenced this connection and others stating, "I need recommendations for jobs or for – actually for my grad program, I needed professor recommendations and I was quick to go back to them and they were more than happy to help me out." Reese stated that she attempts to mirror these mentor relationships in her current work. "And the mentors that I had. Those connections and trying to mimic that in my workplace." Will best captured the essence of the learning community found in the program when he said:

I loved the program [Empower Leaders]. I wouldn't be who I am without it, to be honest, without my connections to mentors, people who I still talk to now like [program administrator], [office staff member], to help me get to grad school... It's even cooler for me to still have those connections with people who I was with all those years ago... And so this meeting good people who I now can tap into across our nation if I so need to.

The findings supported that Empower Leaders alumni highly value the learning

community provided by the program and the benefits that have extended from this community beyond graduation.

### **Formal Learning**

The learning that took place in the Empower Leaders classes has perceived value for alumni in their work environment. After being asked about the most valuable attributes in the program, Britney stated, "I think the things that I learned in the classes..." Responding similarly, Sarah noted, "I would say the in-person classes. I think all-in-all we're more effective, but I definitely rely on the stuff that I learned there." More specifically, some appreciated the leadership inventories layered through the coursework. Will said, "I love the leadership inventories," while Reese stated, "the [emotional intelligence assessment] was probably most helpful." Karis best captured the essence of the value of classroom learning found in the program when she said:

The one [course] that's called collaborative leadership, sorry, I mean, that one kind of the same thing I've been saying, being able to be aware of myself and of others and using that, and then organizations and communities [course] kind of instilled that active citizenship in me...

In this statement Karis connects two specific courses with some of her leadership learning she continues to use in her current context.

### **Peer Coaching**

Peer coaching embedded in the Empower Leaders program was perceived as being valuable to program alumni and involved upperclassmen leading a group of freshmen through leadership modules over the course of a semester. This component of Empower Leaders started after the participants' first year of college, and therefore the participants' perspective is from the positional role of being a coach. The coaches had meetings together in preparation for these modules. After being asked about the most valuable attributes in the program, Sarah stated,

"just being a Empower Leaders coach, that taught me a lot." Responding similarly, Thomas stated, "Even the little ones [experiences] of being a coach for a coaching group I think helps tenfold you know punch home the mission of Empower Leaders." Karis best captured the essence of the value of peer coaching when she said:

...definitely, the empowerment piece that was so important to me started with coaching... And so, that was really a launch pad for me was becoming a coach... But yeah, but just being on the leadership end of that, I really, really loved it... It was a cool opportunity for me to be able to pour into people who were just kinda getting started...

The findings supported that Empower Leaders alumni highly value the experiences tied to peer coaching.

### **Intentional Reflection**

Intentional reflection, both individual and group discussions, emerged as a program attribute that was perceived as being valuable to program alumni. Karis stated, "There was just a lot of self-reflection that really prepared me for interviewing for jobs, prepared me for being an effective graduate student, and it definitely made me more confident going into the workforce for sure." She further discussed unpacking various leadership assessments in the program and said, "It was never just information that was given to us. It was information that was given to us that we were challenged to really think about and really consider in our day-to-day practical application of these things." Lola echoed this concept of reflection leading to application as she stated:

In all my other classes, we worked more based on theory in most of the information. In these [leadership courses], okay this is the theory this is the information, how could you apply this to your life? Or how do you apply this going forward in your group?

Thomas affirmed the reflective nature of the courses stating, "You know Empower



Leaders taught the value of reflection." Will described the larger group reflections that were enmeshed in the learning community. "I love learning about having these deep conversations and so we always had good conversations in class." Sarah led some of these intentional reflections as a trip leader on alternative breaks, she described, "A big part of our role was to lead the reflection at the end of the day." Reese truly captured the essence of intentional reflection across the Empower Leaders program when she said:

Reflection was such a big part of the program and I take that for granted because I think everyone just sits back and reflects and they don't, necessarily... Reflecting on what I learned about myself, whether it be through [emotional intelligence], through the leadership experiences; not just doing all these disjointed experiences. It was more of a cohesive – and maybe that was just me, thinking that reflection was an important part... At every point, I feel like we were reflecting on the journey and what it would mean.

Thus, the following program attributes had the most perceived value for Empower Leaders alumni included leadership experiences, learning community, formal learning, peer coaching and intentional reflection.

### ***Conceptual Framework of Program Attributes***

The data further supported that these five program attributes hold together within a conceptual framework that may be of benefit to practitioners. Intentional reflection, and the learning community were found to be embedded within the other program attributes of leadership experiences, classroom learning, and peer coaching. For instance, Karis described reflecting on her values as a leader through the formal learning environment in the classroom as she highlighted:

But I remember we had to write a reflective paper on it, and so I took it the two times, and then I was able to kind of reflect on how that semester had im-

pacted me and how me reflecting on seeing what this inventory said about my values...

The reflection was a component of the formal classroom learning as Karis completed a written assignment required in her Self-Leadership course. Thomas described the reflection that occurred within the leadership experience of an alternative break trip. "I know a lot of the reflection activities were built around that of, 'Okay, your service doesn't stop here when we leave. How do you bring it to [Home College]?" Sarah led some of these reflections on alternative break trips as she described, "...our role was to lead the reflection at the end of the day..." and "...kind of dig a little deeper into the meaning of the service that we completed."

The data also showed that the learning community was embedded within the program attributes of leadership experiences, formal classroom learning, and peer coaching. Karis described the learning community she found within peer coaching:

...just being able to see your peers leading others and being able to look up to that and being able to go to them I thought was really, really important. And I kind of got that in so much as I was kind of in a community with the other coaches at any given point.

Karis also referenced the learning community found within her leadership classes as she stated, "I remember making a lot of really good friends in that class." Will made a similar connection between the classroom and the learning community as he said, "I was able to open up a whole lot and connected with a lot of students in the class." Lola echoed, "I remember becoming pretty close with the people in those classes."

Britney revealed the learning community embedded within a leadership experience as she described developing a close friendship through a leadership retreat. "I left with a really good friend, and someone that I continued working with for years and years after the thing." Karis described the bonding that occurred through a leadership

experience or action-oriented activity in the program that included an obstacle course that was put together by a branch of the armed services for students in the program. She said, "That was really cool because we got to travel together and then do the thing, and it was hard, and muddy, and cold, and it just ended up being a really good bonding experience." Similarly, Lola found community in the leadership experience of an alternative break trip as she said, "So, with that, I really connected with the people that I went on the trip with and then I'm also doing service while I was there." This statement clearly showed that the "doing service" or leadership experience, had the learning community embedded within in it as she stated, "I really connected with people."

In summary, the data showed that intentional reflection as well as the learning community were embedded within the program attributes of leadership experiences, formal learning, and peer coaching. In

figure 2 below the arrows signify that both the learning community and intentional reflection have a relationship with, or are embedded within the leadership experiences, formal learning, and peer coaching.

**Research Question 2: What additional leadership learning would have been beneficial that was not included in the program?**

Two themes could be identified addressing research question two including alumni group and career focus.

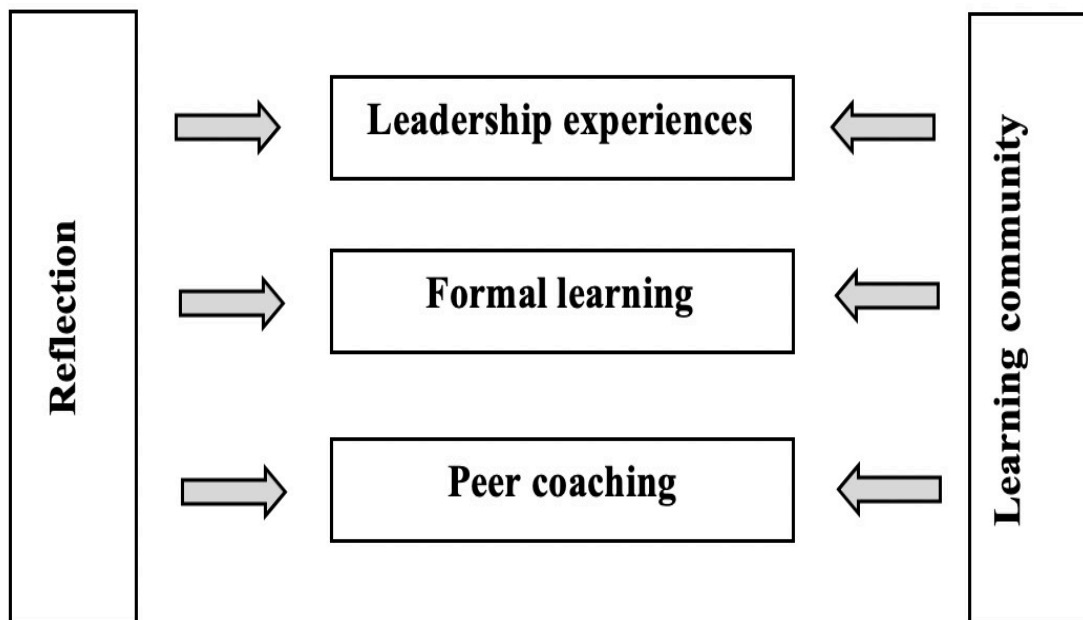
**Alumni Group**

This theme included keeping alumni connected with each other, forming an alumni group, or providing additional leadership learning to alumni through contact with the program. Capturing this theme, Britney suggested:

I think possibly having an Empower Leaders alumni group that you can kind of go back to and say, 'Hey, I'm expe-

**Figure 2**

*Conceptual Framework for Five Leadership Program Attributes Valued Most by Alumni.*



riencing this at work,' and I think that sometimes people who are not involved in the specific situation, they're able to look at it from a different lens, and so if these are people that you've gone through a program with for four years of undergrad, you're able to trust them and the opinions that they give...

Reese believed a similar group could be helpful, but she specifically suggested that the program itself could provide continued learning or support for alumni. She suggested:

I think continued support because I see a lot of persons who were in the program, they're doing great things and I hope that they're still implementing what they learned, and I know a lot of them are... Now that you're living that future, if there could be a way, even a seminar or something where they could brush up on their skills and really relate it to their current workplace that would be interesting.

Reese wanted alumni to "still connect" as well as "get a refresher on" the application of their leadership learning in their work environment.

### **Career Focus**

The second theme, career focus, included the belief that the program content could be more focused on using leadership learning in future careers and having the program more focused on future work. Two participants believed the program focused heavily on service, and that a more career-oriented focus might have been helpful. Lola captured this sentiment as she stated, "I think something that connects to the career more would have been helpful. Because it was so much focused on service."

Thomas also made this connection, and believed the program relied on a service orientation. He said:

I think the aspect of the work... It [Empower Leaders] was very civic based. It felt more like if you're going to work in a nonprofit, oh if you're going to do

these acts of service every weekend. Hey, you're gonna be on the board of a non-profit.

After discussing the service focus of the program, Thomas began to give examples of the type of career focus that he believed to be missing from the program. He stated: ...but it would be so much more beneficial learning – like I said – like, "How do you work with a coworker that you don't like or you all don't mesh well and you're on a team?" Learning how to survive in an organization and not getting flustered or pissed off that your organization does something stupid, you know?

Thomas juxtaposed service every weekend or serving on a non-profit board with applying leadership in the corporate sector.

### **Other Program Recommendations**

The remainder of the program recommendations from alumni varied widely and did not contain overlapping concepts. Sarah believed she was afforded opportunities to practice conflict negotiation but wanted more leadership learning on the topic. She said, "...not just learning through the examples or learning as conflict arose, but just having a session or making it one of the Empower Leaders monthly meetings, something like that." Will recognized that learning on diversity took place in the program but believed a more intentional focus on this topic could have been beneficial. He stated:

Even though it was kind of infused in there here and there, it would be cool to have a course, I think, given our current climate around our nation, just the world at large, and what we're evolving into, a conversation around – or class around – diversity and inclusion.

Britney discussed how she found herself in another state professionally and did not have many connections. She described:

I knew no one here, and even though I knew I needed some type of mentor, I think knowing how to possibly go about that would've made the process maybe

easier to transition to, like if you want a mentor, this is how a mentor-mentee relationship would work.

Also, Brittany believed she would have benefitted with more knowledge on how to find a mentor and how to develop this type of relationship.

### **Research Question 3: What is the perceived value of an undergraduate leadership program for alumni in their professional career?**

Two themes emerged addressing research question three that expressed the high value Empower Leaders alumni placed on the program. The two themes included the experiential capital gained from the program and the perceived contribution to personal career advancement.

#### ***Experiential Capital***

Alumni gained experiential capital from the program that continued to be directly applicable at work and in some cases provided specific job skills. Some of the learned skills were simple, like learning to design a flyer, and others were more complex such as designing an experiential program for an organization or writing a grant. Reese spoke to the applicable skills learned as she expressed, "The skills that I developed through Empower Leaders and also the relationships that were fostered were extremely beneficial," and Will summarized, "I still take what I learned all these years later – some of those tidbits – with me every day." In many cases, alumni directly tied programmatic experiences to their present-day work.

For example, Olivia summarized her experiences on alternative break trips and leadership positions she held on campus as she stated, "...there was a service trip and being able to work with the homeless population directly or the nonprofit assessments. They're all things that kind of have fed into the work I do." In this statement she directly connects her experiences tied to the program with her current professional role. Britney carried over the experiential capital

of her capstone legacy project to work as she described: "So, starting from the capstone project from basically little to nothing, the same in [my current role], so having the list of sites but no real guidance of how to rebuild the program." Sarah echoed, "I think doing the Empower Leaders project – going from start to finish, like finding a problem, doing the analysis, showing impact – I brought that to [my current role], I would say." Some alumni believed the program generally helped them either get jobs or advance in their career.

#### ***Career Advancement***

Sarah discussed a programmatic experience in a job interview as she described, "I used an example from that trip in the interview for my job today. And when I got feedback from the interview...they said that was the example that stuck with them the most." Here she suggests that this example may have helped her get the job. Karis best captured this career advancement stemming from the program when she stated:

I don't think that I would have my role now if it weren't for the empowerment – specifically the empowerment – that I received from the Empower Leaders program... Just right off the bat, I felt like just Empower Leaders gave me the tools, and the social support, and the resources that I needed to be more than I thought that I could be, and that was really helpful in giving me the confidence to go for jobs like this.

In summary, The Empower Leaders alumni highly valued the program due to the experiential capital provided and some perceived that the program contributed to their career advancement.

#### **Limitations**

This study has limited generalizability because of the focus on alumni from a specific undergraduate leadership program and the sample size of eight alumni were employed in either education or the non-profit sector. The alumni perspective in this study

may not represent the voices of alumni from other undergraduate leadership programs. Therefore, readers should carefully assess the transferability of this study to the context associated with their programs. Secondly, we chose to include only alumni that completed all requirements of the program as they could provide data on every element of the program. The perspectives of those institutional alumni who completed only a portion of the program were not included in this study, and this may have led to a highly motivated sample who were more inclined to provide a high valuation of the program.

### **Discussion**

Empower Leaders alumni highly valued the experiential components in the program including the requirement to hold leadership positions on campus, service requirements, requirement to attend alternative break trips, leadership retreats, and other action-oriented components. These types of experiences are valuable for undergraduate leadership development (Boettcher & Gansemar-Topf, 2015; Buschlen & Warner, 2014; Soesbe, 2012), and unsurprisingly, Eich (2008) devoted an entire cluster to experiential learning experiences. Alumni further valued intentional reflection incorporated throughout the program, and the literature continues to support the importance of reflection for leadership development (Haber-Curran & Tillapaugh, 2013; Odom, 2015; White & Guthrie, 2016). Eich (2008) incorporated this attribute within the experiential learning cluster.

The findings supported that Empower Leaders alumni highly valued the relationships formed through the program and the learning community. These findings are consistent with studies that revealed the importance of a vibrant learning community for effective leadership learning (Fritz & Guthrie, 2017; Odom, 2015), and Eich (2008) dedicated an entire cluster to sustaining the learning community. Likely contributing to the learning community, the findings supported that Empower Leaders alumni valued

serving as a peer coach, and participants experienced this attribute of the program from the positional role of coach as they led small groups of freshmen through leadership modules. Although in a different context, small classroom size is an important environmental factor for leadership learning (Fritz & Guthrie, 2017; Odom, 2015), and one of Eich's (2008) attributes of high-quality leadership programs included students engaging in small groups.

The findings supported that alumni highly valued the formal learning that occurred in the classroom during the program. This is consistent with the literature showing that engagement in experiences alone is likely insufficient for leadership development and is best coupled with formal instruction (Romsa et al., 2017; Rosch, 2015). Finally, Empower Leaders alumni believed the program was valuable for their professional careers, and in some cases attributed the program to their marketability and workplace successes.

### **Implications for Practice and Future Recommendations**

As institutions continue to champion the mantra of developing future leaders, research and assessment practices should seek to incorporate alumni feedback because this population is uniquely positioned to help educators determine the effectiveness of leadership preparation. In this study, alumni were able to provide insights on meaningful programmatic attributes and made suggestions for specific program improvements. These findings show that some alumni wanted to maintain connections with each other and the program. Alumni could support leadership programming through providing feedback, becoming donors, encouraging students in their leadership development, or becoming a mentor. Practitioners developing leadership programs should incorporate leadership experiences or action-oriented elements within programming that allow students to practice the process of leadership or at the very least should en-

courage students to engage in these experiences if they are not incorporated in formal programming. Leadership experiences alone are not sufficient for undergraduate leadership learning and should be coupled with some formal learning or curriculum (Romsa et al., 2017; Rosch, 2015).

Empower Leaders alumni highly valued peer coaching, which consisted of upperclassmen students guiding freshmen through leadership modules in small groups. This attribute may be useful to practitioners with larger programs as it allows for smaller groups and the creation of peer-mentor relationships. Additionally, it allows for formal leadership learning to take place and creates experiential leadership positions for upperclassman coaches.

Practitioners may easily overlook the importance of building a positive learning community within their programs. This includes creating environments that foster positive relationships among peers and mentoring relationships with those administering the program. Larger programs may need to consider forming smaller groups and may want to encourage students to at least identify a mentor on campus if time constraints will not permit a mentor relationship with program administrators. Intentional reflection must not be neglected in leadership programming, and it is imperative that practitioners find ways to incorporate reflection with their students. Reflection may take the form of journaling, written assignments, quiet pondering of questions, and group discussions or debriefs.

The findings from this study may help institutions, administrators, and practitioners develop, execute, and fund leadership programming that prepares undergraduates for leadership beyond graduation. Senior level administrators in higher education should seek to fund leadership programs that incorporate attributes associated with high-quality leadership programs (Eich, 2008). The findings suggested the program was highly valuable for the professional careers of alumni, and similar assessment data could

be used by administrators to communicate this value externally for student recruitment and foundation development purposes.

More research is needed to further explore how leadership educators should execute program attributes in practice. For instance, Eich (2008) identified 16 attributes of high-quality leadership programs, but a knowledge gap is missing on how to ensure the attributes themselves are high-quality. Best practices for implementing these attributes are needed for practitioners. Also, the model of high-quality leadership programs proved to be a useful framework for this study and future research could employ or further test this theory. Finally, this study displayed the usefulness of seeking alumni insights for the enhancement of undergraduate leadership programming and more research should seek to include the alumni lens for assessment in other programmatic contexts in higher education.

## References

- Boettcher, M. L., & Gansemer-Topf, A. M. (2015). Examining leadership development through student leader outdoor recreation training. *Recreational Sports Journal, 39*, 49-58. <https://doi.org/10.1123/rsj.2014-0034>
- Buschlen, E. L., & Warner, C. A. (2014). "We're not in Kansas anymore:" Disaster relief, social change leadership and transformation. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 51*(3), 311-322.
- Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS), (2012). *CAS professional standards for higher education* (8th ed.). Organization Published.
- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage Publications.
- Eich, D. (2008). A grounded theory of high-quality leadership programs. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies, 15*(2), 176-187
- Fritz, M. R., & Guthrie, K. L. (2017). Values clarification: Essential for leadership

- learning. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 16(1), 47-63. <https://doi.org/1012806/V16/I1/R4>
- Guthrie, K. L., & Jenkins, D. M. (2018). *The role of leadership educators: Transforming learning*. Information Age Publishing Inc.
- Haber-Curran, P., & Tillapaugh, D. (2013). Leadership learning through student-centered and inquiry-focused approaches to teaching adaptive leadership. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 12(1), 92-116.
- Jenkins, D. M. (2013). Exploring instructional strategies in student leadership development programming. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 6(4), 48-62. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jls>
- Kouzes, J. M., & Posner, B. Z. (2014). *The student leadership challenge: Five practices for becoming an exemplary leader* (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Lunsford, L. G., & Brown, A. B. (2017). Preparing leaders while neglecting leadership: An analysis of U.S. collegiate leadership centers. *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 24(2), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1548051816662613>
- Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. Jossey-Bass.
- Mitchell, D. T. & Daugherty, J. (2019). Learning to lead: Perceptions of undergraduate leadership minor programs. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 18(1), 133-145.
- Odom, S. F. (2015). Undergraduate student perceptions of the pedagogy used in a leadership course: A qualitative examination. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 14(2), 17-29. <https://doi.org/1012806/V14/I2/R2>
- Romsa, B., Romsa, K., Lim, J. & Wurdinger, S. (2017). Undergraduate sport management students' perceptions of leadership skills through service learning. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 16(2), 129-147. <https://doi.org/1012806/V16/I2/R8>
- Rosch, D. M., & Caza, A. (2012). The durable effects of short-term programs on student leadership development. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 11(1), 28-48.
- Rosch, D. (2015). Effects of classroom-based team experiences on undergraduate student leadership development: When practice does not make perfect. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 14(3), 104-118. <https://doi.org/1012806/V14/I3/R7>
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Sage Publications.
- Soesbe, W. J. (2012). *Voices of lived experiences of alumni who completed an undergraduate leadership program in a small liberal arts college* (Publication No. 12471). [Doctoral dissertation, Iowa State University]. Iowa State University Digital Repository.
- White, J. V., & Guthrie, K. L. (2016). Creating a meaningful learning environment: Reflection in leadership education. *Journal of Leadership Education*, 15(1), 60-75. <https://doi.org/1012806/V15/I1/R5>