How do Community College Leaders Learn Leadership? A Mixed Methods Study on Leadership Learning Experiences

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The need for community college leadership development is pressing due to impending retirements and leadership vacancies. To better understand how leaders develop leadership skills and aptitudes, this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study aimed to examine perceptions of community college administrators' leadership learning experiences. The study involved first collecting quantitative data through descriptive survey responses and then explaining these results with qualitative interview data from current community college administrators. In alignment with the theoretical framework focusing on social and experiential learning, this study's findings reveal that learning occurs through a variety of means and experiences within one's environment. When new concepts or skills are related to previous experiences and learning, this assists with learning those new concepts and skills. Results suggest that leadership is a learnable skill, experiences are key to learning leadership, and leadership development programs can integrate experiential learning more intentionally into their curricula. Further research is needed to determine the effectiveness of educational programs for community college leaders working in increasingly complex contexts.

Keywords: community college leadership; leadership professional development; leadership education; experiential learning; Kolb and leadership

The need for community college leadership development is pressing. The impending retirement of many current higher-level community college administrators poses a risk for gaps in community college functionality (Artis & Bartel, 2021; Campbell et al., 2010; Hull & Keim, 2007). This has been deemed an impending leadership crisis brought on by retirements and leadership vacancies (Appadurai, 2009; Chen, 2020; Forthun & Freeman, 2017), creating a need for new and effective leaders to step into these roles (Eddy, 2013). The effect of these vacancies is compounded by the fact that the average tenure of community college presidents is lower than the average president's tenure at other higher education institutions (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Phillippe, 2016), recently reaching an all-time low of 6.5 years (Gagliardi et al., 2017). Additionally, although internal hires have been the dominant model for leadership succession in community colleges (Amey et al., 2002; Eddy & Boggs, 2010), many potential Chief Academic Officer (CAO) candidates within universities are also close to retirement or do not desire to be CAOs because of the increasing demands of the job (Jones & Johnson, 2014). While there is an increasingly diverse pool of potential CAO candidates, the increased demands on diverse CAOs, especially women of color, create more challenges for diverse candidates seeking CAO positions (Braxton, 2018; Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019).

These growing leadership vacancies, combined with the need for efficacy and equity in leadership succession, have led to an increasing demand for adjustments to community college leadership development initiatives (Calareso, 2013; Moustafa, 2016; Wallin, 2006). Specifically, initiatives to develop community college leadership competencies, build teams, develop organizational talent, and increase individual ability to lead under pressure are essential to community college success (Artis & Bartel, 2021; Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019). To meet this growing demand for skilled leaders, further research about how community college leaders develop leadership is required. Since the financial crisis of 2008-2009, finances at community colleges have changed, and increased national emphasis has been focused on community colleges as suppliers of qualified workers (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Eddy et al., 2019). Previous studies, such as Brown et al.'s (2002) study of community college leaders' perceptions of their preparation for leadership roles provided by their doctoral programs, merit revisiting in the contemporary context. This study seeks to fill the gap in the literature on perceptions of leadership learning for this contemporary moment, as people's beliefs in their abilities to learn can influence their abilities to learn skills and concepts (Yin & Yuan, 2021). The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was to examine perceptions of community college administrators' leadership learning experiences. The study involved first collecting quantitative data and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data to address the following research question: What are community college administrator participants' perceptions of leadership learning?

Literature Review

The existing literature highlights various methods through which leadership is typically learned. Leadership workshops and seminars, internships and shadowing, mentorship from senior administrators, coaching, networking, collaborations, and formal learning systems, such as graduate programs, are common avenues for imparting leadership competencies (Channing,

2020; Elmuti et al., 2005; Hull & Keim, 2007; Strom et al., 2011). Modern studies on effective community college leader preparation have supported an increased focus on teaching practical skills and real-life contextualized problem-solving (Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Sullivan & Palmer, 2014; Amey, 2006). Gilbert et al. (2018), Mann et al. (2015), Storey & Cox (2015), and Voelkel et al. (2016) have made cases for using immersive virtual simulations as case studies to increase the personalized learning and problem-solving that educational leaders need to address 21st-century issues. Voelkel et al. (2016) argued that the job-embedded, experiential learning employed by some graduate programs has proven ineffective due to inconsistencies and a lack of pedagogical intentionality. The literature has also emphasized that leadership development and graduate programs can help to nurture self-confidence; self-control; emotional intelligence; and a level of knowledge of one's vision, values, and emotions (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Dagen et al., 2022; Goleman, 2004), which may be valuable in matching leader candidates to community college contexts that are good fits (Amey, 2006).

Studies have focused on evaluating the need for professional development for community college administrators (Boggs & McPhail, 2016; Eddy, 2010; Martin, 2021) or describing the need to increase the number of individuals in the leadership pipeline at community colleges (Eddy, 2013; Piland & Wolf, 2003b; Wrighten, 2018). Most studies also suggest that leadership is best learned through leadership-focused activities rather than formal education programs (Eddy & Boggs, 2010; Goleman, 2004; Polanyi, 1958; Raines & Alberg, 2003). More specifically, the excessive focus on explicit knowledge at the expense of tacit knowledge makes leadership programs ineffective (Amey, 2006; Eddy & Garza Mitchell, 2017; Elmuti et al., 2005; Hammons & Miller, 2006; Polanyi, 1958). Many formal leadership programs primarily emphasize theory and research, leaving graduates insufficiently prepared for the practical demands of leadership roles (Brown & Posner, 2001; Elmuti et al., 2005; Piland & Wolf, 2003b). Wallin (2006) found that, despite often being necessary for obtaining a presidency, doctoral leadership degrees are not always indicative of leadership skill acquisition. However, some scholars have argued for the importance of graduate programs in preparing top-level administrators for their roles (Artis & Bartel, 2021), as such programs may be crucial in understanding the specifics of community college leadership, such as policy, planning, budgets, and law (Channing, 2020; Hull & Keim, 2007). Strom et al. (2011) asserted that there is a need for substantial continuing leadership education and short-term development opportunities. Eddy and Garza Mitchell (2017) argued that it is essential to focus leadership development on networked leadership rather than "hero leaders," which requires extending professional development opportunities to a broader scale of leaders within an organization, not just those in positions traditionally considered as leadership roles.

Community college presidents' have suggested the following for community college leadership graduate programs: using realistic case studies, providing flexible programs, recruiting community college professionals, utilizing current and former community college leaders' expertise, and applying learning to regional contexts or community colleges (Hammons & Miller, 2006; Brown et al., 2002). These presidents underscored the importance of leadership training and specialized professional development on finance, marketing, fundraising, equity and inclusion issues, student success and persistence, political considerations, and public relations (Hammons & Miller, 2006). In a study on community college presidents in Oklahoma, Vargas (2013) posited that the most pressing issues facing community college leaders, including working

with funding and communication, relate to the president's awareness of and skill at working within the political realm.

This study's findings address the gap in the community college leadership literature about learning leadership competencies in the contemporary context, as much of the literature on community college leadership learning predates contemporary contextual influences that have significantly changed the pressures that community college leaders face. These issues include state mandates, declining enrollments and funding, regional community needs, free community college, accreditation requirements, calls for accountability, COVID-19 concerns, and the needs of increasingly diverse campuses and external constituencies (AASCU, 2021; Anaya, 2018; Buckley, 2018; DeJear et al., 2018; Eddy et al., 2019; Eddy & Boggs, 2010; Jones & Johnson, 2014). Because of the complexity of community college leadership today, leadership educators need a better understanding of the methods through which community college leaders learn leadership and how this learning translates into effective leadership practices in modern community college contexts (Gillett-Karam, 1999). This study's findings suggest that leadership learning from experience, formal education, reading, mentoring, and colleagues align with Kolb's (2014) cyclical process of learning, Fenwick's (2004) co-emergent perspective, and Dewey's (1938) experiential learning model. These educative experiences lead to the development of adaptive competencies, such as the abilities to tolerate ambiguity, to think abstractly, to use flexible approaches, to think logically and critically, and to identify multiple alternative solutions.

Theoretical Framework

Kolb's (2014) theorizations of experiential learning and learning processes underpin this study's theoretical framework. According to Kolb's cycle of learning, the experiential learning process includes integrating knowledge through formal learning and prior experience, engaging in activities where one applies knowledge in realistic contexts, and reflecting on knowledge to analyze and synthesize what one has learned to create new knowledge. Kolb emphasized that learning is best conceived as a process, not an outcome, and ideas are not fixed but shaped and modified through experiences. Learning results as individuals resolve conflicts between opposing ways of understanding the world. Learning also involves the individuals' thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving as they adapt to the social world and interact with their environment. In line with Kolb's description of experiential learning processes, participants in this study emphasize how a variety of experiences—self-directed, formal, and informal—have influenced their leadership learning. Kolb contended that learning is a holistic and adaptive process that encompasses all aspects of life throughout the lifespan. Adaptive competencies emphasize creativity, critical and logical thinking, decision-making, seeking alternative solutions, problem-solving, and even scientific research.

Fenwick's (2004) co-emergent perspective reimagined the experiential learning cycle, arguing that experience, reflecting, thinking, and acting are inseparable rather than sequential. She suggested that individuals' experiences can only be known to them through socially available meanings. Thus, meaning-making—or the development of what Kolb called adaptive competencies—takes place within and is shaped and limited by "systems of culture, history, social relations and nature" (p. 49). Participants' learning happened within systems, and their perceptions reflect the ways of knowing available to them within these systems.

Although participants frequently discussed formal and informal leadership learning, it is crucial to recognize, as Dewey (1938) contended in *Experience and Education,* there are multiple issues with theories or philosophies of education that adhere to "Either-Ors" (p. 1). Dewey pointed out that:

> the history of educational theory is marked by opposition between the idea that education is development from within and that it is formation from without; that it is based upon natural endowments and that education is a process of overcoming natural inclination and substitution in its place habits acquired under external pressure. (p. 1)

In other words, learning cannot be reduced to a dichotomous model of education from informal and formal experiences. Learning occurs within one's environment through a variety of means and experiences. New concepts and skills are learned with the assistance of their relationships to previous experience and learning. Importantly, as cited throughout the literature on social theories of learning, experiential learning includes social learning, such as learning related to observation (Bandura, 1971); models (Bandura, 1971); positive and negative reinforcement (Bandura, 1986; Bandura et al., 1961); and individual characteristics related to self-efficacy and motivation (Bandura, 1993; Lim & Kim, 2003; Song, 2005).

Methods

The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was to examine perceptions of community college administrators' leadership learning experiences. After securing IRB approval, the study involved collecting descriptive quantitative data and then explaining the quantitative results with in-depth qualitative data. In the quantitative phase of the study, during 2019, I developed a 13-item descriptive survey. The survey items were open-ended questions about leadership learning and the participants' backgrounds. The survey was administered to faculty, staff, and administrators at educational institutions across the United States to examine perceptions of leadership learning, leadership challenges, and leadership styles. Nearly 150 participants responded to the survey (Channing, 2020). This current study focuses exclusively on the community college administrators' responses (n = 68) to this survey. In the initial descriptive survey, participants reported that they thought leadership is a learnable skill**,** that it is often learned through on-the-job experiences and models/mentors, and that leadership professional development is only valuable under particular conditions**,** such as when the instructors have significant first-hand leadership experience.

The qualitative phase was conducted in 2020 as a follow-up to the quantitative results to help explain and validate survey results. Utilizing pragmatic and dialectic validation methods described by Harris and Brown (2010) and Fila et al. (2015), I systematically compared survey response themes with those themes present in interview transcripts and asked similar questions in the follow-up interviews as in the survey instrument. This comparative and iterative approach revealed consistent themes across the survey and interview responses. In this exploratory follow-up, I interviewed twelve community college administrators from across the U.S. to better understand perceptions of leadership learning, navigation of politics and human relations, and communication strategies in community college contexts (Channing, 2021). Participants were recruited based on expressed interest in participating in future research on the quantitative survey instrument and through snowball sampling, whereby one participant recommended

another. Purposeful and expert sampling was used to identify participants who met the inclusion criteria (e.g., U.S. community college administrators) and could provide meaningful and rich data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Upon reaching saturation, a stage at which no new insights were provided by participants as recognized through initial coding, I ceased sampling and interviewing (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Interviews were transcribed by secure third-party software and then checked for accuracy by re-listening to interview audio recordings. Two research assistants and I coded the transcripts using first- and second-order coding methods, whereby we derived fewer and more distinct codes through re-coding transcripts (Saldaña, 2016). We then compared codes and derived themes from these codes related to leadership learning and professional development. Using multiple coders and researchers to analyze material, I was able to ensure intercoder reliability and notice patterns in codes that eventually assisted in developing emergent themes across transcripts (MacPhail et al., 2016). These themes included experiential learning, bad examples/negative experiences, formal education, reading, mentoring, and colleagues. As recommended by Creswell and Creswell (2018), I kept a journal and memoed, as well as provided thick description to ensure trustworthiness and bracketed transcripts to mitigate bias. I define my positionality through intersectional identities: a person with multiple ethnicities who is genderqueer, from a working-class background, currently a middle-class professional, and a current higher education academic leader. By bracketing my thoughts and perceptions and member-checking, I sought to mitigate and be aware of my biases, often related to my positionality. For example, I frequently discussed my own leadership learning from experience in my notes and how this may influence my development of codes and themes. Also, I could relate to the leaders' challenges in navigating power and politics in the community college context and was attuned to their navigational and leadership strategies. I used member-checking whereby participants gave feedback on responses and analyses, which enriched the overall study process and descriptions. This process enabled me to discern whether participants felt analyses and interpretations were accurate and to make needed revisions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Results and Discussion

Quantitative Survey Results

Participants

Results were derived from an initial descriptive quantitative study on leadership teaching and learning (Channing, 2020). These results focus on the portion of the survey sample who identified as community college administrators. Sixty-eight community college administrators participated in this survey. The majority (91%) of participants were 40 years of age or older. The majority (60.29%) identified as women, and 39.71% identified as men. Most (83.33%) participants identified as white, while 7.58% identified as African American/Black and 12.12% identified as other racial/ethnic categories.

Leadership Learning

Table 1 illustrates that the majority (86.8%) of the community college administrators surveyed indicated that they perceived that leadership could be taught. In comparison, 8.8% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 4.4% indicated that leadership cannot be taught.

Table 1
Leadership can be Taught

	Frequency (n)	**Percentage (%)**
Strongly Agree	18	26.5
Agree	41	60.3
Neither agree nor disagree	6	8.8
Disagree	3	4.4
Strongly Disagree	0	0

Open-ended Responses

In open-ended responses, community college administrators reported that leadership learning occurs most frequently through mentorship, experience, trial and error, innate/natural traits, formal education/professional development, and observation of leaders (positive and negative examples). Participants indicated that leaders needed to develop improved people skills, listening skills, communication practices, ethical practices, collaborative abilities, change management skills, self-reflection, and abilities to navigate organizational cultures. Participants underscored the need for leaders to avoid ego-driven behaviors and attitudes. Participants recommended many strategies for leaders to develop effective leadership skills. They suggested mentoring programs, informal mentoring, leadership conferences/seminars, leadership style assessment questionnaires, formal education such as leadership degrees, the study of scenario/case studies, communication-focused workshops, and conflict resolution workshops. Some participants reported that leadership cannot be learned, with one saying:

> I don't know that leadership can be 'learned.' Some people just have an inherent, unteachable quality that makes people want to follow them. I believe that people can have role models and try to mimic leadership behavior and qualities but may not ultimately have the innate qualities that make them a true leader.

However, the majority reported that leadership can be learned and shared the ways that leadership education had manifested itself in their current work. They perceived the leadership professional development they had completed resulted in improved skills related to communication, working with people, basic leadership, decision-making, and self-reflection. For example, one participant mentioned of their leadership education that "these opportunities have helped me to create a more positive environment, collaborate more often, and delegate responsibilities as needed." Participants also suggested that leadership professional development helped them to see the "bigger picture" and to become open to diverse ideas, thinking abstractly and critically, and identifying multiple solutions to problems. Although many

reported leadership professional development as helpful, several participants claimed that leadership education did not help. One participant said, "The classes provided little value as none of the instructors had actually led a complex organization."

The participants' open-ended responses reflect elements of Kolb's (2014) experiential learning process, especially regarding the continuous nature of their learning of leadership skills. The responses include "experiences" as an explicit category. However, the other identified means of learning leadership—mentorship, trial and error, formal education, and observation—are distinct types of experiences that Kolb would recognize as leading to relearning through the application, reflection, and creation of new knowledge and that Fenwick (2004) would recognize as inseparable activities leading to learning. For example, the participants' identification of mentorship both as a means through which they had learned and as a strategy for developing more effective leadership skills aligns with Kolb's (2014), Dewey's (1938), and Bandura's (1986) suggestion that learning involves integrating prior knowledge with new knowledge gained in realistic, social contexts. Further, like these participants, Dewey (1938) and Bandura (1971) recognized that learning occurs through interactions with one's environment and includes internal and external processes and formal and informal learning experiences.

Participant descriptions of the skills leaders need, as well as the behaviors and attitudes they should avoid such as negativity and egotism, demonstrate Kolb's (2014) concept of abstract conceptualization. Participants are developing their concept of a leader by integrating their observations, concrete transactions, and reflections into new understandings of what makes a "good" or "effective" leader. This "good leader" is often framed as collaborative, communicative, wise fiscally, and savvy politically. As Fenwick (2004) explained, these conceptualizations emerge from the knowledge about leadership available to participants at any given time: the more knowledge and experiences available, the more meaning the participants can make. These understandings of leadership also emphasize the need to adapt to circumstances and environments, and poor examples often reveal maladaptive or ineffective behaviors or strategies (Richards, 2012).

Qualitative Study Results

Participants in the initial quantitative study reported that leadership can be taught and that they were able to develop in several critical leadership competency areas, such as communication and human relations, which were also reported as areas where leaders tend to need improvement. The purpose of the qualitative study was to determine the validity of the survey results through comparative analysis and to better understand the ways community college administrators learn to lead, communicate, and navigate human relations and politics in their contexts.

Participants

Twelve community college administrators were purposefully sampled in the qualitative phase of the study. They were interviewed between February 2020 and September 2020. Nine participants were presidents; two were vice presidents, and one was a director. Five participants identified as women and seven as men. Two identified as black, and ten identified as white.

Participants had an average of 26 years of higher education leadership experience. Broad descriptions and vague identifiers are used to protect participants' confidentiality.

Research Question: What are community college administrator participants' perceptions of leadership learning?

Ultimately, Kolb (2014) argued that learning occurs in all settings and throughout all stages of human life, expressed through adaptive abilities. Participants' responses indicated a variety of forms of leadership learning with some being self-directed and others being formal, such as workshops and graduate programs. These themes reveal the importance of adaptation in leadership development. For example, adaptive abilities include open-mindedness, the ability to contend with ambiguity, think abstractly and critically, be flexible, and evaluate multiple alternative solutions (Kolb, 2014). These manners of thinking and abilities align with Fenwick's extension of Kolb and others' work on experiential learning. Fenwick (2004) contended that "the crucial conceptual shift of an embodied experiential learning is from a learning subject to the larger collective, to the systems of culture, history, social relations and nature in which everyday bodies, subjectivities and lives are enacted" (p. 49). In other words, Fenwick extended Kolb's experiential learning theory to encompass larger social and cultural interactions and embodied experiences, rejecting mind-body dualistic models of experiential learning. Participants' descriptions of their perceptions are grouped in this section by the five identified themes: experiential learning, bad examples/negative experiences, formal education, reading, mentoring, and colleagues.

Experiential Learning

During interviews, participants frequently cited experience as an important way to learn leadership skills. One participant said that learning about politics and leadership was "completely different" from his prior work experience and required "dealing with all these different groups that you never had to deal with before." Overall, he asserted, "as far as being a leader, it's experiences. … It's dealing with people." He connected "learning how to operate with people" with "learning how to trust them to do their jobs." He asserted the importance of "who you hire and who you fire" and "keeping people on message, on mission." All of this was learned "over time but I found … lacking from my doctorate," but these skills were "what I really need to know."

According to Kolb (2014), these concrete experiences often lead to reflection, learning about particular contexts, action based on the experience, or engagement in further observation. For example, another participant discussed the "many experiences" that helped him learn to be a leader, specifically "any number of difficult situations …. as a dean." Because he was faced with emergency situations, he learned to "handle emergencies and how [to] handle literally death and really tragic kinds of situations." However, these were just some examples of experiences that informed his leadership learning. He also learned "so much in the everyday work of trying to navigate, [especially] some of the financial and administrative metrics that are that you're really responsible for and need to be concerned about." Thus, his responses to experiences, as Kolb (2014) described, varied depending on the context, although he described learning as increasing with the level of difficulty an experience. "Life or death" experiences required a rapid learning

process and subsequent response. Fenwick (2004) described these learning experiences as evolving from "collective participation in complex systems" (p. 50). These experiences, such as navigating social networks, human relations, and typical managerial tasks, require "dynamic interaction" within social structures and micro- and macro-levels in "unpredictable and inventive" ways (p. 51).

Several participants discussed how experiences with other organizations contributed to their leadership learning. One participant discussed Girl Scouts as an early opportunity for leadership that her parents encouraged. She described her parents as making

> sure that from the sixth grade on, I was really active in a lot of clubs and band, and so just putting me in positions where I had to in order as an African American young girl to stand out and really shine. I had to exhibit certain leadership characteristics so that people wouldn't suppress me.

Her parents recognized the unique challenges she would face as an African American woman and prepared her for success later in life through the encouragement of early leadership learning experiences. Kolb (2014) and Fenwick (2004) explained that learning is the transaction between an individual's traits and external circumstances or between their personal and social knowledge. The participant's early experiences with clubs, band, and Girl Scouts introduced her to social knowledge—in this case, expected leadership characteristics—that transformed her personal knowledge about how a leader behaves and what characteristics she needed to exhibit. These experiences also helped shape her learning about navigating leadership and human relations in a cultural context of systemic racism, where she would need skills to assert herself and make herself visible to be successful.

One participant emphasized that the variety of experiences and positions helped her learn leadership. "Now I have ... those titles ... so I had a heck of a lot more on my plate, [so] I had to be a better leader." She also began to learn by observation; "that's why I was trying to look and see what people are doing [and] how people reacted to what I was doing." Ultimately, she wanted "to see if I could actually do and say what I wanted to do as compared to just being a bully because of my title." According to Kolb (2014), "Immediate concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. These observations are assimilated into a 'theory' from which new implications for action can be deduced." According to Bandura (1971), modeling can happen formally or informally, occurs through observing media, and assists the learner in organizing experiential learning into "new patterns of behavior" (p. 10). This participant's experiences and observations helped her envision and reflect upon the type of leader she wanted and did not want to be. She worked toward being her ideal leader and engaging practices aligned with her concept of an ideal leader.

Leadership has supplied opportunities that he would not have otherwise had, leading to further investment in himself personally and professionally. Britzman (1998) posited that educators should interrogate that which they ignore and seek out learning opportunities that would lead to knowledge that they may initially resist. This influence was present when this participant reluctantly became a leader but later embraced the learning experience. Additionally, as Fenwick (2004) argued, individuals make meaning of their experiences with the knowledge made available to them in the system in which they are operating. The opportunity for this participant to learn more about his institution, other disciplines, and leadership provided additional knowledge from which he could create new understandings of leadership.

Leadership learning from other contexts was often transferable. A participant described transferring leadership learning from the military to the higher education context. He reported:

It was transferable to those who have never served tend to think it's autocratic organization, and it really is not because … you don't have to be autocratic. So the military. A lot of the learning and education I received there transferred into the skill set I needed here. Now, there are some things I had to pick up when I transition to a new type of environment where because yeah, I know you'll be surprised to hear this, because you tell somebody this is what they have to do doesn't mean they're going to do it.

Kolb (2014) posits that as individuals' learning develops through experience, they are better able to differentiate and articulate their experiences and then re-integrate them to increase their awareness and control of themselves in the world around them. This participant appears to have been able to differentiate among his experiences in a variety of contexts, resulting in a higher-level integration of these experiences to better understand his role as a leader. Following policy and procedures and basic management skills were like military requirements. However, he had to learn about leading in the community college where, due to shared governance and employee statuses, the flattened hierarchy made it less effective to simply give orders. Fenwick (2004) posited:

Experience itself is knowledge-driven and cannot be known outside socially available meanings. What is imagined to be 'experience' is rooted in social discourses which influence how problems are perceived and named, which experiences become visible, how they are interpreted, and what knowledge they are considered to yield. (p. 45)

This participant adapted military leadership skills to the community college context and learned to lead without simply giving orders, recognizing the differing social contexts and the ways to influence and persuade depending upon the context. Moreover, military leadership training assisted this participant in developing critical problem-solving skills, which he adapted to the higher education context and learned through experience that he needed to be more flexible in his approaches to managing employees and decision-making.

Bad Examples and Negative Experiences

Participants frequently described poor leadership examples as helping them to learn leadership skills. One participant shared, "I think, oddly enough, I had a lot of really poor leaders in front of me, and … like bad teachers that helped me to become a good teacher." Another participant described bad examples or negative experiences as helping him learn leadership.

So just whatever experiences you can get, you can always use that. There's an old adage nothing bad could ever happen to a writer because when something bad happens, they use it in their story. … Whenever you see something going wrong, I have to learn. I want to learn from their mistakes and not my mistake.

Fundamental to Kolb's (2014) theory of experiential learning is that learning is a continuous process grounded in experience. Part of this continuous process is contending with experiences that do not match expectations. Kolb claimed that it is in the "interplay between expectation and experience that learning occurs" (p. 28). In these participants' cases, it may be that they had a particular working concept of good leadership, and the examples of poor leadership experienced did not meet their expectations. Following Kolb's theory, this interplay would result in the

integration of their reflection on and observation of these poor examples into their continued learning about leadership.

The experience of being terminated shaped another participant's leadership development and learning. She perceived that this supervisor was threatened by her, leading to her termination and to her learning how to navigate politics at institutions and with superiors. "I think I am a popular leader now because… I really learned about leadership from that experience, and it was sort of midway through my career." She underscored, "So …. nothing like being terminated by your boss… to really teach you, what's important. … So I think that was my greatest leadership lesson." In addition to interrogating what really mattered to her as a leader, this experience taught her how to navigate personalities, politics, and organizational contextual factors in ways she had not previously considered.

These two participants emphasize their negative experiences as transformative in their understanding of leadership. When considering Kolb's (2014) theory of experiential learning, their stories suggest that negative experiences, such as loss of confidence or termination, are particularly powerful concrete experiences to be turned into new conceptualizations of leadership. Bandura (1977) contended that poor models were often rejected while positive models were emulated in practice. This created greater memories of positive behavior and subsequent repetition of observed and modeled positive behaviors. These participants came to develop an understanding of leadership by rejecting negative models and adapting to social and contextual factors.

Formal Education

Several participants described formal leadership professional development programs and leadership graduate degrees. For example, one participant commented on the usefulness of coursework on leadership development in understanding their leadership style: "So that's where I learned more about the different theories, per se, to figure out what do I do, what kind of style do I thrive in." Another participant underscored that his doctorate in higher education leadership provided "a phenomenal theoretical background of what I needed to learn about the professoriate and … how to deal with them and trends and history of higher ed." All of this was "very interesting and very useful to a point." However, the participant also emphasized that formal education could not replace experience in learning leadership. Similarly, another participant asserted:

> I do think formal education does reinforce or introduce skills, qualities that one also needs because it keeps you current and knowledgeable of new skills that closely align with reality within the world that we're in. So the combination of the innate, as well as formal education gives you the complete package.

This participant underscored the importance of formal leadership learning to be at the forefront of leadership trends; however, according to this participant, part of leadership is innate, so leaders must possess both leadership education and innate skills to be effective leaders.

Whereas participants see their formal education and experience on the job as distinct, Kolb's (2014) theory of experiential learning and Dewey's philosophy of experiential education include all experiences individuals may have, regardless of whether they happen in a formal learning environment or daily living. Individuals learn and relearn from all types of experiences.

Formal education, like an on-the-job situation, offers leaders an opportunity to reflect on their experiences, develop new ways of understanding their worlds, and apply what they have learned. The formal learning programs these participants described have reshaped their other on-the-job experiences. They have reflected on and integrated concrete formal education experiences into their current understanding of leadership (their "innate" leadership) and applied this understanding to their daily work. This process—what Kolb refers to as abstract conceptualization—may be what one participant names "the full package." This application and testing (what Kolb called "active experimentation") lead to new educative experiences in the workplace, and the process of experiential learning continues for these participants. Dewey (1938) connected formal education learning with experiential learning that occurs outside the classroom environment, arguing that instruction that builds upon students' experiences leads to directed growth. Directed growth, as provided by formal education, according to Dewey, should consider social conditions and seek to create meaningful and educative experiences.

Reading

Dewey (1938) saw reading as part of experiential learning, which "is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment" (p. 42). Three participants emphasized reading as important to their leadership learning and their regular activities. One participant described himself as "very non-traditional in regard to education, but I do believe many persons learn leadership or can be born as leaders and can indirectly learn critical skills, if he or she are avid readers." Another participant described being "infatuated with ... the writings [of] Abraham Lincoln, and ... I still continue to read about leadership, and... I read about, you know, various types of leadership strategies." A third participant reported when asked about how to learn leadership, "Read. So, they [mentors] would send me articles and things like that." Reading, like formal education, is an experience that offers leaders an opportunity to reflect and modify their concept of leadership. The participant reading about leadership strategies is likely modifying his concept of leadership (abstract conceptualization) through the concrete experience of interacting with the text of the reading (Kolb, 2014).

Mentoring

Participants often discussed the ways mentorship helped their leadership development. The participants were directly mentored and observed by their mentors to learn the reality and the art of leadership. One participant described his mentor as "unbelievably skilled in developing relationships with people, everybody liked him," which he described as unusual for a leader. Another participant reported, "I certainly learned a lot about budgets and revenues and things that I never would have learned any other way." When he was a young professional, a participant learned from a mentor whose office was across the hall from him. Then he attributed his current success to "having great examples of people who were good leaders [and] not so good, and I tended to gravitate towards those folks that I thought [were] effective to serve as my mentors and that really helped shape my leadership."

Mentors often encouraged these participants to push themselves and extend their learning to new topics and organizational units. For example, a fourth participant reported, "[My mentor exposed] me to areas outside the chief academic officers' area, but she also trusted me to do my job, which was fantastic. Give me some general direction and trust me to do my job." She learned from this example, saying, "that's how I'm going to treat my folks too." Similarly, a fifth participant described two mentors as setting "me on the path to understanding how to be an effective leader in higher education because I didn't come out of education." They guided her to "do a lot of different things," such as "go to conferences and meetings. Go to the sessions. Learn as much as you can about cutting-edge work." They also encouraged a breadth of experience, and she reported:

> That allowed me to understand the scope of my responsibilities, especially when it comes to student success and completion, because I was on the student services side and then get active in these national organizations because exposure to other colleagues will help you not become stale.

Colleagues

Participants frequently reported that colleagues assisted their leadership learning. Fenwick (2004) argued that "concrete experiences do not exist separate from other life experiences, from identity, or from ongoing social networks of interaction" (p. 46). Colleagues are parts of social networks of interaction and provide similar support as mentors do without the power differentials, allowing participants to be their authentic selves while seeking advice and input to inform their decision-making and problem-solving processes. A participant reported:

> So, the exposure to them has also enriched me in really important and interesting ways. So, they've given me great feedback. They've been they let me vent and they give me strategies on how to be a more effective leader because with them, I can let my hair down and just be me. So, all those things really sort of roll up into the 42 years in higher education. Most of it as leaders, because I just like a little sponge. I just want to know about leadership and what makes people effective.

Another participant described learning from colleagues across campus. He reported:

> So I got to meet and build sort of a network of folks that were not necessarily just in my department or my division, but they were sort of across the campus, so I have some relationships across the institution.

Like working with mentors, these participants are guided by other colleagues with whom they test ideas and solutions and engage in reflection. Kolb (2014) described all "learning [as] a continuous process grounded in experience," and he pointed out that this "has important educational implications" and "implies that all learning is relearning." Although many of these participants have years of experience and formal training in leadership, they continue to seek colleagues in similar roles to assist them with their professional development, problem-solving, and reflection. Moreover, as one of the participants mentioned, assisting other colleagues provides valuable learning experiences for her as well because she learns through the process of talking through the issues that others face.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study suggests several implications for practice and further research. Using experiential learning, reflective exercises, and mentoring, leadership development programs can encourage the development of adaptive competencies, such as the abilities to tolerate ambiguity, think abstractly, use flexible approaches, think logically and critically, and identify multiple alternative solutions. Leadership professional development and degree programs have opportunities to integrate more "real world" or contextual learning experiences into their curricula, such as through internships and to utilize mentors within their programs and as parts of experiential learning. Mentoring is essential for community college leader candidates from historically excluded groups, such as Women and people of color (Braxton, 2018; Delgado & Ozuna Allen, 2019). Although Piland and Wolf (2003a) argued that "on-the-job training was, and still often is, unorganized and entirely dependent on the aggressiveness of the individual administrator or faculty leader and the opportunities that present themselves" (p. 94), leadership development and graduate programs can organize these more intentionally so that participants' growth areas are aligned with internships or other experiential learning opportunities. Mentors who are practicing leaders in their fields can guide leadership experiential learning, assisting aspiring leaders as they identify growth areas and experiences that lead to growth in these identified areas. Additionally, mentors from diverse professional backgrounds can assist mentees by providing an interdisciplinary perspective on issues leaders face (Raines & Alberg, 2003). For leadership programs that include experiential learning, further research is needed to learn how experiential learning impacts career trajectories and leadership skills development. Overall, further research is needed on the effectiveness of leadership degrees and professional development programs and ways to attract those with leadership potential to engage in leadership preparation.

Conclusions

Participants reported that leadership is a learnable rather than simply an innate trait. Participants in their quantitative survey and qualitative interview responses underscored the importance of leadership learning through experiences. They reported that they learned from on-the-job experience and observation of other leaders. They learned about leadership from both positive and negative examples and experiences. Mentors also played essential roles in these participants' leadership development. Mentors scaffolded participants' development of specific skills through exposure to experiences that provided growth in key areas that would increase their marketability as leaders. Participants emphasized in qualitative interviews and survey responses that they learned to avoid negative leadership behaviors such as hubris and bullying from observing other leaders who engaged in these behaviors. Further, interviews and survey data indicated that leaders needed to develop effective communication, human relations/personnel management, and fiscal management skills. These are critical areas for leadership professional development and degree programs to target through experiential learning exercises, reflective practices, mentoring, and direct instruction.

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